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Gringo Guns

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GRINGO GUNS

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GRINGO GUNS

PETER FIELD

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CONTENTS

1. "To Hell with a Posse" 1
2. The Empty Corral 14
3. Salt for Their Tails 24
4. "That Pot Shot—He's Bad—" 37
5. "Yuh Goin' to Make Her Deputy, Too?" . . 46
6. Massacre in the Canyon 58
7. "Yuh Better Start Prayin' for a Pair of Wings" 69
8. "Just Pot Shot and Me" 89
9. "She Didn't Say So, but She Will" 107
10. "Hoglegs for a Warrant" 119
11. "Things Happen Fast in Santa Fe" . . . 133
12. "This Rope'll Be Right Handy for the Lynching" 148
13. "Just Rode Down to Collect That Po'Cat" 160

1. "To Hell with a Posse"

Pat Stevens jerked the pair of big bay ponies back on their haunches, and the buckboard quivered to a sudden stop. The cloud of alkali that had trailed them began to drift over them from behind.

"What's the matter with *you?*" demanded Sally Stevens, looking around in surprise. This wasn't the way her husband usually handled horses.

"You hear what I hear?" he muttered.

"No, I don't hear anything."

"Listen—carefully. . . . Who-o-ah—quiet there, bronc."

"Yes —now I do—sounds like— -" she broke off. "What is it, Pat?"

"Shootin'."

"Nonsense! There's been no trouble in Dutch Springs since——"

"Shootin', I'm tellin' you."

"Someone on a spree, then. Probably old Whispering Joe has liquored up again and——"

Pat shook his head decisively. "No-o-o, Sally, if Whisperin' Joe had emptied every bottle in Colorado he'd never be makin' all that noise. That's no jamboree. There's too much of it—too steady—and there's Winchester's talkin', too—not just .44's."

"You can't possibly tell from here," she objected. "Why, I can just barely——"

Pat snorted. "Your ears are right nice to look at, old lady, but I reckon they're too small for you to hear much that goes on." Then his face sobered. "I tell you, Sally, things're poppin' down there, and I don't mean Fourth-of-July firecrackers."

"All right, what are we waiting for?"

Pat gathered up the reins and clucked to the buckskins. Then he teased the whip across their backs until he had the

buckboard rocking over the rough trail.

Sally chuckled.

"Huh?" Pat demanded without looking around. "What's funny?"

"Remember that first ride you gave me up from Hopewell?" she grinned, hanging on to the seat. "You nearly killed me."

"Stopped your hysterics, anyway!" he retorted. "And you've never had 'em since."

"What do you think we're running into down in town?"

"Whatever it is, *you're* not runnin' into it," Pat broke in curtly. "You had your last gunfight five years ago. We'll just mosey on till we're near enough to see what game the boys are playin'. Pull that rifle out from under the seat and look it over, will you?"

"You're another one that won't be taking a hand either," Sally announced calmly. "You're a rancher now, not a gunman."

Pat grinned. "Ever hear what the Irishman said when he hightailed it out of a gunfight that was gettin' sort of warm?"

"No," said Sally politely. "What *did* the Irishman say?"

" 'What's the Worrld to a man when his wife's a widdy?' "

Sally sniffed. "Not very funny," she decided. "I reckon you're right about those rifles, though. I can hear them now. What do you suppose——"

Pat shrugged as he cut sharply at the lagging off horse. "Sounds like the hell of a fight. We'll see for ourselves in ten minutes."

* * *

The sound of those guns had jerked Pat's memory back five years to the time when he and redheaded, one-eyed Ezra and the truculent, swarthy Sam Sloan had slipped unobtrusively into the town of Dutch Springs looking for the

gang that they thought were centered in Powder Valley, and the rewards that they'd get if they rounded up their men dead or alive.

The three had ridden in looking for trouble. They'd found it. When it was all over, Sam and Ezra had ridden off again, their jeans heavy with reward money. But Pat had stayed on in Powder Valley, for he'd not only found trouble, he'd found Sally Phillips. And because he had settled down there, Sam and Ezra had eventually drifted back, and gone into ranching, too, some forty miles to the south.

Pat could hear things much more clearly now—a steady barrage of firing. It sounded like a lot of guns working, and as though someone were barricaded and holding off a gang.

Pat shifted both reins into his big left hand, slipped his Colt out of its holster, snapped open the cylinder and spun it. He knew his gun was in perfect condition. He kept it that way. But he hadn't used it for so long that he wanted to make sure.

"You're not going to need that gun today, Pat Stevens," Sally told him quietly.

"The rifle all right?" he demanded.

"Yes, but——"

"From the top of the next bluff we'll be able to see what's goin' on. It looks right down into town."

Five minutes later, Pat was standing up in the buckboard and there was no longer any question of what was happening. All he didn't know was "who" and "why."

At the far edge of the little town where it straggled into the rolling yellow prairie, a low adobe hut was obviously in a state of siege. From the defensive fire, Pat figured that there must be at least five men inside. And scattered around in a semi-circle, crouching behind bushes, sniping from two nearby houses, and behind fences, Pat counted at least twelve figures. They looked small at that distance, but he could see them clearly.

Sally clutched his arm excitedly. "Pat, what is it?"

"They'd better swing some boys over the arroyo back of that cabin unless they want 'em to slip out behind," he muttered absently.—"Sandy Darcy's in it—I can see his big Mex hat. No one else in town's got one. The jasper by the frame house just got his. Sally, I reckon I'd better slip on down and see what the stakes are."

"You're not going!"

"Oh, yes, I am," he said quietly.

He vaulted over the wheel of the buckboard and swiftly began to strip the harness off the near horse.

"Any scrap the Darcy boys are in is my scrap, too. You know that. You stay up here in the buckboard. I'll be back before you can say 'knife.' "

Sally remembered with a searing flash the time she'd tried to stop this man of hers before. You didn't stop Pat Stevens when his eyes were narrow and his jaw set.

"All right, Pat," she said soberly. "But you'll never get there on Blazer bareback with just a hackamore."

"No-o-o?" he jeered. "I'll ride him that way and twist his tail all the way.—Here, take this harness and gimme the rifle and those shells."

"Will you—be careful?"

"As a retired sergeant!" he reassured her. "Just goin' down to see what's happening to Sandy and the boys—so's I can tell you all about it." He slipped up on the pony's back and dug his heels in. Pat rode like an Indian—always had since the age of six.

"So long, old woman!"

"So long, Pat."

It was just a whisper because her throat was suddenly very dry.

As Pat galloped up the deserted main street of Dutch Springs, it was obvious that everyone was either under a bed or engaged in the battle that was now raging on the outskirts of the town. Some houses had the doors closed

and windows shuttered. Other doors stood wide open as though there had been no time to shut them. The door of the bank was sagging open. The windows in the general store just across the street were shattered.

Pat ground-tied his horse at the rack in front of the Gold Eagle Saloon, and, cutting out behind the dancehall, moved cautiously toward the shooting. A hundred yards on a stray shot whistled by him, then two more. He took to the adobe wall, and followed it to its end.

Twenty yards ahead of him, the top of a man's hat appeared from an irrigation ditch. Then an arm. A rifle edged up cautiously, spoke, and dropped swiftly back.

A moment later Pat flattened out in the ditch beside the man with the rifle.

"How yuh. Buck?" he drawled. "Out huntin' coons?"

Buck Grimes grinned. "Welcome, stranger. How d'yuh like our city?"

"What the hell you all doin' out here?"

"D'you and Sally keep any money in the bank?"

"Some. Why?"

"Well, you better get yoreself over to that 'dobe hut yonder and ask for it. There's about eight or nine sons o'—— over there, up from the south, who says it all belongs to them, and they're doin' their damndest to prove it."

Pat's eyes narrowed. "So-o-o. Stuck up the bank, eh?"

"There ain't nothin' left in the bank but the floor," Buck nodded grimly.

"How long's this here party been goin' on?"

"Half an hour, mebbe. They're tucked up in that 'dobe hut safe as a gopher in a hole for the time bein'."

"Anybody runnin' things? Or are you boys just lyin' down wherever you find a soft spot? From what I saw from up on the bluff, you're just scattered around any which way."

"Things happened sort of all at once. The Sheriff, he got his when they come out of the bank. And when I say spreadin' lead, I mean spreadin' lead. They're poison."

"Is he dead?"

"No. Not yet—so I reckon things *ain't* organized the way they ought to be. But they'll have to come out of that hole of theirs sooner or later."

"Sure," agreed Pat sarcastically. "They'll come out, all right—it'll be dark in an hour or so—and hightail it out o' the arroyo in back."

Buck Grimes swore. "Ain't they got that arroyo covered?"

"Didn't have, fifteen minutes ago. You reckon I'd better mosey around and see what's what, Buck?"

"The boys'll do anything you tell 'em. You know that. But, for God's sake, be careful. Them greasers in there are poison with their guns, I tell you. They've laid down three or four of the boys already."

"Greasers?" frowned Pat. "You sure?"

"Mexicans, if ever I seen 'em."

"Hm-m-m. How far's this ditch of yours run?"

"Damned if I know," grinned Buck. "I didn't dig it. But I wish to hell whoever did had made it deeper."

"Well, you stick around here, huh? I'm goin' to see if I can spread the boys out all around the house. And hold your fire! There's no use shootin' it all away."

Buck nodded. "You'll find Sandy Darcy over behind that pile of logs yonder."

Pat started crawling along the ditch on his hands and knees, trailing his rifle behind him. The ditch led to within ten yards of the logs Buck Grimes had indicated. As he approached, a rifle ground out three quick shots from behind the pile of logs.

"Sandy!" called Pat. "Sandy Darcy."

"For the love of Mary, is that you, Pat Stevens? And what would you be doing in town today—and crawling along in that ditch like a viper? Is it afraid of the little lead bullets you are?"

"You're damn right, Darcy. Can you get over here from

that wood pile? You're ridin' too close to Buck Grimes. We got to spread out."

"For no man but yourself would I risk it, Stevens, but——"

Darcy, bullets spitting around him as he plunged into the open, landed sprawling in the ditch all over Pat. He picked up his big black hat, and dusted it carefully.

"Is Jim all right?" demanded Pat.

The boy's face clouded. His older brother Jim was teller in the Dutch Springs Bank.

"I don't know, Pat. The greasers came roarin' out of the bank like bulls of Bashan before anyone knew what was wrong, and I've not seen anyone since who can tell me about Jim. I'm fearful——"

"Probably just tied him up," Pat said reassuringly. "Listen, kid, we've got to spread out. As things are now, the rear of that house is free and clear as the open range. Any idea how many of the boys there are?"

"Not more than a baker's dozen, even if they're all still drawing cards. Half the town went gallivantin' down to old Appleby's ranch for the barbecue."

"Where in hell've the greasers got their horses?"

Sandy shook his head. "They ain't confided in me," he admitted.

"Well, you shove along this ditch about thirty yards. And what the hell is the use of your blazing away the way you were doing at someone you can't even see?"

"Sure, and it's——"

"You're just black Irish, and like the noise," Pat grumbled. "Hold on to your ammunition, you young fool. Let the greasers use up theirs. I'm goin' to cut back to that shed, climb up on the roof and get the lay of the land and just where everyone is. Then we can——"

"You'll never get yourself across that open field, Pat Stevens," Sandy said omniously. "Those coyotes'll pick you off like you was a rabbit."

Pat grinned. "Since when has a Mexican been able to hit anything at four hundred yards?"

"*Those* greasers can. I tell you——"

"Watch me and see how it's done," said Pat.

"I'll be prayin' for you," Sandy muttered, and crossed himself as Pat leaped out of the ditch and started zigzagging across the broad open field.

Well, he might as well try to cover him, Darcy decided. Standing up recklessly in the shallow ditch, he poured a stream of lead into the two small windows of the adobe hut. But he couldn't keep them down, and they began sniping at the running figure.

Sandy could see the dust spurting up all around him.

He was down! Now they'd shoot hell out of him!

With a curse, Sandy Darcy dropped his rifle and started on a dead run to where Pat lay sixty yards away. Twenty yards and he was still going. Thirty yards, forty, now he was almost there, untouched by the hail of lead around him

His muscles straining, Darcy heaved Pat over his shoulder, and staggered on toward the shed.

"The lucky Irish," he gasped as he reached shelter. "Now, let's look at you."

He felt Pat's heart and found it beating regularly. Swiftly he examined the still body. There was a bad gash on the temple, but nowhere else any sign of injury. He rolled Pat over on his stomach. Nothing in the back, legs, arms. He frowned, and went over Pat's whole body more carefully. Then he sat back on his heels and swore softly.

"So, I'm the zany to risk my young life for a blundering, stumbling ape who can't get hisself across a field without trippin' over something and hittin' his head on a rock! Bad 'cess to you, Stevens. You can lay here and rot for all of me. I'm going back to the greasers."

Late that evening four grim-faced men from Dutch Springs rode over to the Lazy Mare Ranch to call on Pat

Stevens. There was John Cropper, president of the Dutch Springs Bank; gray-haired old Judge Luce, formally attired in his black frock coat; Buck Grimes, and Sandy Darcy.

"You all right, Stevens?" demanded Judge Luce as they followed their host into the big spotless kitchen. "I see Mrs. Stevens has your head bandaged up good and proper."

Pat nodded glumly and sat down. He was still shaky.

"If all the damn fool things I've ever done——" he muttered. "I ought to be locked up. Sandy, they told me what you did for me. I won't forget it."

The boy looked embarrassed.

"You gentlemen like some coffee? Thought we'd come back here into the kitchen where it's warm. . . . Sally, Sally, come and put some coffee on, will you?"

"Coffee would go good," admitted Buck. "Gettin' sort of sharp at night now."

Sally Stevens entered the kitchen and walked right up to Darcy. "Thank you, Sandy," she said quietly. "I reckon we owe you a lot more than we can ever repay."

"And, sure, Sally, it'd be a poor rat who wouldn't——"

"What news?" broke in Pat. "I was sort of dazed and out of my head when I came to. That must of been just about the time the greasers slipped off. What's happened?"

"Soon as it got dark, they slipped up the arroyo to where they had their horses tied, and rode off pretty as you please. A posse started off after 'em, but lost the trail in half an hour 'cause it was dark, and came back," growled John Cropper.

"How's Sheriff Bayne making out?"

"He died two hours ago," said the Judge, clearing his throat. "Didn't have a chance. They shot him twice, right through the lung."

"Poor Mrs. Bayne," muttered Sally.

"Stevens, that was what we come to see you about," announced Cropper bluntly.

Pat looked puzzled.

"You've got to take over Bayne's star, and go after those greasers."

"Oh, no!" Sally cried involuntarily.

"Why me?" Pat demanded.

"'Cause you're the only real gunfighter in town," threw in Buck Grimes. "The rest of us are jest——"

Pat shook his head. "Like Sally told me this afternoon, I'm a rancher now, and I better stay a rancher. There are others in Dutch Springs would make a better Sheriff than me—and they ain't got a wife and family."

Judge Luce rose slowly from his chair, buttoned his long black coat, walked over to where Pat was sitting, and looked down at him solemnly. "Pat, my boy, Buck Grimes is right. We need you—badly. You're the only top hand fighter around these parts. Not so many years ago you hit Powder Valley and hit it hard. You wiped out the worst gang of murdering thieves in the state. You cleaned all the corruption and hell out of Dutch Springs. Then you settled down here to live. It's your town now. Since you settled scores with Red John Stout five years back, it's been a pretty decent, quiet place—until today."

"I've hardly pulled a gun since—except for huntin'," protested Pat. "I'm gettin' old, too."

Sally Stevens was standing by the stove, tense, her pretty face very rigid.

"You made Powder Valley safe and half-civilized and you've got to help keep it so. It's your duty," Judge Luce went on.

John Cropper came over and took his stand beside old Judge Luce. "Pat," and his voice was very quiet, "have you thought how many honest citizens, and friends of yours, will lose all their savings if we don't get that bank money back? Eighteen thousand dollars, the scoundrels took—and, between you and me, the bank can't stand it.—We'll give you as big a posse as you want and everything else, but you got to go after those thieves."

"Which way did they ride?" Pat asked absently.

"North."

He snorted. "Bet you they've already swung south toward the Territory. They're headed for their own range."

"Will you do it?" demanded Judge Luce.

Pat looked over at Sally doubtfully. He could feel the pull of excitement and the thrill of a manhunt already surging in his heart, but——

"You decide what you ought to do, Pat," she said steadily.

He saw her white face and the fear in her eyes. He thought of their three-year-old son asleep in the front bedroom.

"Can't do it," he said shortly. "Sorry, gentlemen."

Judge Luce turned to Sandy Darcy and nodded almost imperceptibly.

Sandy took out the makings and, his elbows on his knees, began to roll a cigarette. There was absolute silence in the room. Sandy lit his cigarette carefully, and by the light of the match Stevens saw that his face was drawn and tense.

"Pat, this afternoon you were after askin' me about Jim—at the bank," he said at last in a husky voice.

"What about Jim?" Pat demanded sharply.

"Jim was by way of being a pretty good friend of yours," the Irishman went on slowly. "He's done a goodish bit for you in his time."

"You mean——"

"They shot him—in the back—after tyin' him up, Pat Stevens—as dirty and foul a murder as there's ever been in Powder Valley!" The boy's voice broke.

And again tense silence filled the room.

Sally Stevens was the first to speak. "I reckon that settles it, Pat. You've got to do it," she said in a low voice.

Pat nodded. "All right," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "But just until this gang is rounded up. Then I'm through."

The four men relaxed.

"I knew you would, my boy," said Judge Luce with a

smile of relief. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a big silver Sheriff's star and handed it to Pat.

"Mrs. Stevens, have you a Bible? We're going to swear him into office right now."

"I thought a Sheriff had to be elected?" Pat objected.

"Yuh were," Buck Grimes chortled; "at the Gold Eagle this evening!"

"Seems to me I remember a jasper named Stevens shooting up that same saloon once," remarked John Cropper slyly. "Couldn't have been you, could it, Mr. Sheriff?"

Pat grinned. "To think of *me* wearin' one of *these!*" he said with a grimace at the Sheriff's badge. "How Sam and Ezra would ride me. Say that's———!" he broke off and looked excitedly at Sally who had just reappeared with her big family Bible.

She caught what was in his mind, and nodded. "I'd feel lots better about it, too," she smiled. "You think they'd do it?"

"Do it? *Do it?*" he demanded in amazement. "What's got into you, Sally? 'Course they would." He turned to John Cropper. "Tell me everything you know about this holdup," he ordered crisply.

Everything wasn't much. There had been eight bandits—Mexicans. They'd suddenly appeared in town on foot, looted the bank, murdered Jim Darcy, taken refuge in the adobe hut until dusk fell, and then slipped away through the arroyo to their horses and vanished into the night. There was no clue as to who they were or where they'd come from.

"This is goin' to be tough goin'," muttered Pat thoughtfully. "Probably up from New Mexico. It ain't far to the line, and you all know what New Mexico's like."

"You want us to call in the U. S. Marshal from Pueblo?" asked Cropper.

"I do not," snapped Pat. "I reckon Dutch Springs can take care of its own affairs."

"But a local Colorado Sheriff won't have any standing or

authority in New Mexico," the Judge pointed out.

"What use is standing and authority? I've never needed 'em and I reckon I don't now," Pat said dryly.

"How big a posse will you want?" demanded Buck Grimes. "We'll have to get back to town and get the boys together and swear 'em in as deputies. 'Bout fifteen?"

Stevens shook his head. "To hell with a posse. That isn't the way I work," he said. He rose and walked over to where Sandy Darcy was sitting in the corner by the stove. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Reckon you want to draw cards, don't you, Sandy?"

"I was hoping you'd be asking me," Sandy nodded.

"All right, get yourself back into town and get ready. Got the right top horse for hard goin'?"

"The finest bronc in the state," boasted Sandy. "Why, Pat, he's——"

"All right, all right, Irish," Pat grinned. "We're travelin' light—mostly food. Extra shoes for your wall-eyed cayuse, though."

"You're not going off alone with just that boy, are you?" demanded Cropper with a puzzled frown.

Pat nodded. "I may pick up two pals of mine down south a ways."

"Ezra and Sam?" cried Buck Grimes excitedly.

Pat nodded. "I need Ezra for tracking. That one eye of his sees more than any Injun's two. And Sam—well, you know Sam."

"God, I wish I was going with you," Buck said wistfully. "Sandy, d'you know who you're riding with, you black devil? The three—Oh, what the hell, lemme go, too, Pat?"

Pat shook his head. "Sorry, Buck. Only reason the kid's comin' is that it's—well, sort of his affair, after Jim——"

"Four men goin' out to round up eight!" muttered John Cropper. "You're crazy, Stevens. You got to take a regular posse."

"It'd get in my way," said Pat dryly. "There's only one

way I can work—and only two men I've ever ridden with."

"Let him alone, John," urged Judge Luce. "It's up to him."

John Cropper cleared his throat. "I ought to tell you, we're offering a thousand dollars reward for the leader of that gang, dead or alive. And another thousand for the recovery of what they stole. Eighteen thousand, mostly in gold and silver certificates. I'll give you the serial numbers."

Pat grinned. "Don't bother about that. Any bank notes we find lookin' as though they belonged up here, we'll bring back without studying no numbers. But what about that gang's top hand?" he asked casually. "Anyone know what he looks like?"

"Yeah, Tom Cozzins got a look at him. A short, swarthy Mex with a face shaped like a rabbit. All his upper front teeth gone——"

Pat straightened up suddenly. "Tom say anything more?" he broke in. "Anything about an ear?"

"Yeah, his left ear's slit, V shaped, as though he was a calf."

"I'll be damned!" said Pat softly.

"You know him?" cried Darcy.

Pat nodded. "That's an hombre they call Pot Shot Touslin, or I'll take to keepin' sheep. About seven years ago I seen him—near Santa Fé. He's no Mex, though; just a breed. He used to hang around the Mexicans a lot, and work them for what he could. Reckon the buzzard has picked the Mexican carcass clean by now, if that's him, coming up so far north. Sandy, my lad, we roll off at daylight. Get out the jerky, Sally, and lots of it."

2. The Empty Corral

At dawn, two silent men jogged away from the Lazy Mare corral under the bluff.

Pat, in the lead, turned due south across the rolling table-

land. "We'll look for track about fifteen miles down the valley—where it narrows down," he told Darcy.

"And you're sure that it's south they've gone?"

"You'll see. They headed north, turned into the hills, swung back, keeping to the high ground for a few miles, and then worked back into the valley where it's easier going."

"How would you be knowing all that?"

"It's what I'd 'a done," the older man said simply.

"Pat, when we meet up with this Pot Shot, if there's a showdown, I'd be wanting to—I don't care about the reward, but—well, I reckon you'll be understanding how I feel about Jim."

Stevens nodded. "It's your brand he's carryin,' kid. He's bad, though, this Touslin. You'll have to move fast."

"I'll be doing that," replied Sandy grimly.

Where the foothills crowded in on Powder Valley, narrowing the miles and miles of rich, fertile range down to a bottle neck, they halted. The flat basin was here only about three miles wide.

"Let's see what we can pick up here," said Pat. "If we find what we want, we'll head straight for the Bar ES and talk to Sam and Ezra."

"And be losing our trail?" asked Sandy, puzzled.

"Oh, we'll pick that up again. They'll he headin' either for some pass through the Culebras below the Spanish peaks, or they'll cut straight down between the range and Trinidad."

Some ten yards apart, the two horsemen started working slowly across the valley, their eyes studying the ground. Twice Pat jumped off his horse to examine tracks, but it wasn't until they'd almost reached the western hogback that he found anything that satisfied him.

"Told you so," he grinned up at Sandy. "Here we are. Get down here and look over these tracks, Darcy. You may be wantin' to know it again. . . . What do you read?"

Darcy walked back and forth over the soft ground. "Eight of them, all right," the boy agreed.

"And what else?" Pat persisted.

"One of their ponies has cast a shoe—they're all soft shod." And Sandy started to mount again.

Pat snorted. "Why the hell don't they teach you youngsters some of the things you ought to know?" he demanded. "God knows *I* don't know tracks compared with some, like Ezra, but *look at those tracks.* They tell you a dozen things you haven't seen."

"What?"

"Well, they're travelin' fast; one of the horses is lame; one's lost a shoe—you saw that; another's goin' to lose a shoe inside of five miles. And sizes! You didn't even notice sizes; or that three of the eight horses have worn their fore shoes down all so different that you could spot their trail if you saw it twenty years from now. No wonder Colorado's goin' to the dogs filled up as it is with a lot of wild, ignorant Irish, ridin' around half-blind and still wet behind the ears!"

Sandy grinned good naturedly. "A rare treat it is to be out horseback riding with you, Mr. Stevens," he crooned mockingly. "And could you be telling me the color of the horses' eyes from these tracks?"

Pat looked at him in disgusted silence. "Come on," he said at last, "we'll head straight for Sam and Ezra's ranch."

Dusk was falling as they came in sight of the Bar ES ranch house. It was a small, one-story adobe-and-log shack set in a thick grove of young cottonwood trees, with the corral and sheds well away in the open.

"If you can keep from babblin', do so," warned Stevens. "Let me do the talkin'. These jaspers are all right but they need the right sort of handling—huh, things must be looking up for 'em. They're feedin' two wranglers!" He pointed to the west where two horsemen were hazing a small herd of

horses away from the corral toward the open range.

As they rode up to the ranch house Sandy studied with curiosity the two strange figures who suddenly appeared in the doorway. One was tall and rangy, with a thick shock of red hair straggling around a broad weatherbeaten face. And there was only one eye. The lid of the other eye was closed, flat to his cheek, with a jagged white scar running diagonally off across the temple into the hair. This red-headed Cyclops, Sandy knew, was Ezra. And beside him, almost under the great arm that breached the doorway, was Sam Sloan—squat, broad, and swarthy-black, with one of the crookedest noses Sandy had even seen.

He had expected a vociferous greeting between the old friends, but to his surprise, Pat rode right up to the door without appearing to notice his hosts, and they paid no attention to the arrivals beyond watching them. As Pat swung off his pony, Ezra turned to Sam.

"What the hell d'you suppose that tenderfoot's totin' two guns for?" he demanded. "Where's he think he is?"

"Just a show-off," said Sam contemptuously.

"Packed up as though he's goin' somewhere, too," Ezra observed suspiciously. "I don't like his looks."

"Yuh never have," grinned Sam.

Pat paid no attention to them, but turned to Sandy. "You reckon this dump is too lousy for us to stop the night? I don't much like the looks of anything I see, but my pony's sort of tired."

"Yuh know, Ezra, some folks never do learn how to ride a hawss without killin' him," observed Sam impersonally. "Look at young Sandy Darcy's pony now, fresh as a daisy."

"And when I think of the hours I wasted tryin' to teach that flat-footed bushwhacker how to ride," sighed Ezra. "What d'you suppose his old dad'd say if he was still livin' and could see what his boy Patrick could do to a fine piece of hawss flesh."

"Mebbe we'd better ask him in, jest for the sake of his old

dad," Sam chuckled. "He was a fine man. . . . Hello, Pat, you devil, how're yuh? Glad to see yuh, too, Darcy. . . . Ezra, take those poor animals down to the corral, and yuh might as well turn th' others out to feed."

"Leave 'em right here," said Pat. "We may not be stayin' long."

"What!"

"Depends."

"Come on in," Ezra urged with a wide smile of welcome. "Reckon this here visitation calls for a swallow of red eye. Ain't seen you in almost three months, Pat. How's Sally and the kid?"

"Good."

"We was just about to eat. Reckon there's enough for all of us, 'cause I was cookin' up enough for today and tomorrow," said Sam bustling over the stove. "Ezra, where'n hell'd yuh put that can of bacon grease?"

Half an hour later they had finished a meal of beans and fried pork, biscuits, stewed dried apples and steaming black coffee.

"What brung you boys down here?" demanded Sam after a satisfying belch.

"We're takin' a little vacation and goin' south," said Pat casually, rolling a cigarette.

"After stock?"

"No, I don't reckon we'll be buyin' any stock."

"Well, what——"

"Speakin' of stock, Sam, you grazin' any more cows than that poor lot you had last time I was by?"

Sam shook his head ruefully, and shot a stream of brown tobacco juice into the can of ashes by the stove.

"You sure could use more than you've got with the range around here. Why don't you pick up a few hundred more head?"

"Payin' for 'em with what?" Ezra snapped. "You know Sam and me ain't got no ready cash."

"Too bad, too bad, 'cause there'll be lots of good grass goin' to waste in the spring. You could probably pick up a likely lot of young stock now for a thousand dollars."

"Yuh lendin' it to us?" demanded Sam pointedly.

"No. Wish I could, Sam. Nothin' Sally or I'd rather do. But, to tell you the truth, we've got tied up pretty short ourselves. That's really why Sandy and me are ridin' south ——"

He paused and rolled another cigarette. Sam and Ezra were both watching him, waiting for him to continue, but he tilted back in his chair, and started shooting a series of heavy blue smoke rings up toward the ceiling. He had obviously finished with the subject as far as he was concerned.

"Gold minin' again?" Ezra at last demanded reluctantly, unable to contain his curiosity.

Pat shook his head.

"Well, what then?" Sam demanded guardedly.

"Oh, a gent down south owes a friend of mine some money," Pat said easily. "Sandy and me are goin' down to collect it."

"Sam!" yelled Ezra. "Watch yourself. I don't like the sound of this. I seen Pat at work before."

"Why, Ezra," protested Pat mildly, "what in the world ——"

"Trouble, that's what. Trouble," cried Ezra. "You never do show your smooth face around but what there's trouble. I ain't havin' none of it this time."

"Sam," said Pat stiffly, "seems to me this Ezra of yours is a damn ungrateful coyote after what you and I have done for him. Last time we got him into what he calls 'trouble', he struts out with his hair full of fleas and his pockets full of gold—enough to keep himself liquored up for two years and then buy this nice little ranch."

"What's up yuhr sleeve?" demanded Sam. "Like Ezra, I'm comin' to realize yuh want somethin'. Need help, Pat?"

"He ain't gettin' none here," growled Ezra.

"No, Sam, we don't need no help," drawled Pat, rising and stretching lazily. "Sandy and me can handle things all right. Just thought we might let you boys in on some easy pickin's."

"What's in it?"

"Couple o' thousand altogether."

Sam whistled. "That's too much money for it to be easy!"

"Couple o' greasers held up the bank at Dutch Springs," Pat explained.

"How many?" demanded Ezra.

"Oh, you sneakin' coyote, you're gettin' interested now!" chuckled Pat. "But, what the hell. Anyone who can afford to carry two paid hands now don't really need any of this reward money."

There was silence for a moment. Sam looked puzzled.

"What d'yuh mean, paid hands, Pat?"

"Your two wranglers."

"We ain't got no wrangler, much less two."

"We saw them when we rode up," threw in Sandy.

"Great guns, Sam!" Ezra snorted. "You ain't goin' to let that puppy pull your laig, are you?"

Pat looked from one to the other curiously. "If you ain't got two hands here on the ranch, who in hell did we see hazin' your string of horses out toward the range?" he asked quietly.

The two front legs of Sam's chair came down with a bang. He looked at Pat ominously. "This's gone 'bout far enough, Pat Stevens. If anyone let them hosses out of the corral, it was you. 'Cause neither Ezra or I has been near 'em since noon. Now, what's yore game?"

"Sam, gospel truth," Pat said slowly. "As we rode up, your string was bein' scattered off to the west."

"Rustlers!" shouted Ezra starting for the door.

Sam, his face grim, took a cartridge belt, heavy with a Colt .44, off the wall and buckled it on. He picked up his rifle, and followed Ezra. Stevens and Darcy trailed after

him.

At the corral they found Ezra burning up the night with his curses.

"Sam," said Stevens thoughtfully, "strike you as how someone must've needed some horses mighty bad to come right up to a corral and call for 'em?"

Sam nodded. "Before it was even real dark, too," he muttered. "Needed 'em bad—and in a hurry."

"The greasers!" cried Darcy excitedly. "Their ponies must have been dead beat."

"There was twenty-three head in the corral," Sam said. "Lot o' hosses for two greasers! Sure there wasn't more than *two,* Pat?"

"May've been one or two more," Pat grinned, "but the reason they took all your horses was so's you wouldn't have nothing to ride when you missed 'em. They'll rope out the ones they want and haze the others off so's you'll have trouble findin' 'em."

"Pat Stevens—if I had anythin' to fawk," Sam drawled, "I reckon I might be persuaded to ride south with yuh. Even Ezra might come along, but I don't know about that, 'cause I don't know just how strong he feels about losin' *his* half of those ponies. *I* was right fond of some of those broncs of ourn and——"

Darcy broke in, "Couldn't we——"

Stevens silenced him with a quick gesture. "Ezra, we all know you ain't so fast with a hogleg, and you never have been able to hit anything that wasn't mighty big with a rifle, but——"

Ezra swung around angrily. "You, Stevens, who the hell taught *you* to shoot? Ezra! One-eyed Ezra."

"But, as I was sayin'," Pat went on coolly, "you *can* track some, and there's likely to be some pretty tough trailin' before we get through. Sort of like to have you come along."

Ezra nodded sullenly. "I knew hell would pop loose soon as I saw you ridin' up. No help for it."

And the big man stamped off toward the ranch house.

"Same old Ezra," grinned Pat. "Couldn't keep him from goin' for a million dollars, but you always gotta go through the same old game."

"Yeah—but what about findin' some of them horses?" suggested Sam. "We ain't goin' to walk."

"Pronto, and you're comin' with me, Sam. Darcy can keep Ezra company, tell him what he needs to take along, and teach him how to do up a blanket roll. He'll like that." He grinned. "Sandy, you can talk now. . . . I told him," he explained to Sam with a chuckle, "to keep quiet until we got Ezra lined up, and he's been scared to open his mouth."

Sandy heaved a sigh of relief. "There's not much left of my tongue after me holding it so long between my teeth," he laughed. "Shall I be bringing the broncs over from the house, Pat?"

Stevens nodded and watched the youngster disappear into the dark.

"Since when yuh been playin' around with children?" Sam drawled.

"He's young," Pat admitted, "but he can shoot, he can ride, he's got guts—and the greasers murdered his brother, Jim. That's enough for me."

"Poor kid! What's this gang, and how d'yuh happen to be holdin' cyards?"

Without answering, rather self-consciously, Pat pulled his Sheriff's badge out of his vest pocket. "I've not worn it yet," he said apologetically.

Sam looked at it aghast. "Good God!" he muttered. "Not a *Sheriff!* Yuh? Wait'll Ezra sees *that.*"

"And I'm swearin' you and Ezra in as full-fledged deputies. We got the law on our side for a change."

"It'll be the first time! Remember when yuh—say, why don't yuh *wear* that star? Why for yuh puttin' it back in yore pocket?"

"Folks we're callin' on don't like stars. They just use 'em

to shoot at. . . . Here are the horses. Let's get goin'. Probably take us most of the night. Sandy, I'll ride that cayuse of yours, and Sam can take mine. Let's switch saddles, though."

"I took off the saddle bags and packs."

"Suppose yuh're a deputy, too," said Sam sourly to Darcy. "Too damn much law around here for me."

Pat swung into the saddle, and sat there silently for a moment. Then he turned to Sam.

"Reckon they might be holdin' that string together till morning?" he demanded.

"Why for?"

"So's to pick out the ones they want by daylight and so's to keep you from getting anything to fork before they're ready to ride. Even greasers gotta sleep sometimes, and they ain't had much sleep lately, I reckon."

"Don't sound reasonable. Especially if the jaspers yuh saw spotted yuh ridin' up."

"They didn't—and likely they know there's no other ranch near-by where you could get help."

"Mebbe."

"Ridge of hogback running down to the west, ain't there?"

Sam nodded.

"Any water on the other side?"

"Spring's about three miles south."

"Come on, then, I got a strong hankerin' to taste the water from that spring. S'long, Sandy. You better get some sleep."

"Seems sort o' natural to be ridin' alongside of yuh," Sam confessed half an hour later. "Why ain't yuh ridin' Darky or Nigger? Time was when yuh wouldn't swing a leg over any bronc exceptin' one or t'other."

"They're gettin' kind of old for this sort of trip. I took a young pony. That roan you're straddlin' is all horse."

"Yeah, he's all right. . . . Say, Pat, who the hell we goin' after?"

"You've heard of him," Pat said significantly. "You've even seen him."

"Spread it, spread it!"

"Remember when we were down in New Mexico, near Santa Fé, 'bout seven years ago? Remember a nasty piece of crossed meat known as 'Pot Shot'?"

"Pot Shot Touslin! Do I *remember?*" muttered Sam. "Wait'll Ezra hears this! He'll turn green. Half breed, warn't he, and poison?"

Pat nodded. "Reckon pickin's were gettin' too lean down in Mexico, so he come up north."

"How big's his gang—between friends, Pat?"

"Eight, all told, I reckon—until he gets near home, and then he'll have every greaser in New Mexico workin' for him."

"Yuh sure like 'em tough," said Sam glumly. "Reckon Ezra's right 'bout yuh after all—just a damn maverick without any sense."

3. Salt for Their Tails

Stars were out, and there was light enough for them to push their horses at a running walk through the murk of the night. There was a bitter tang to the air, for it was well on in November, and Sam cursed the fact that he'd come out without even a jacket.

"There'll be snow most any day now," he reflected.

The horses picked their way cautiously up the steep rise of the hogback and automatically stopped at the crest of the ridge to get back their wind. Pat Stevens scanned the dark lowland to the west for some trace of a campfire.

"Yuh must think that Pot Shot gang is mighty careless," growled Sam. "They're probably twenty miles south by now and still keepin' their saddles warm."

"Might be they think they've thrown the posse off to the north and got this part of the state to themselves. . . . Let's get on toward that water you were talkin' about."

They dropped off the hogback, and for half an hour followed the ridge south. Then Sam led sharply off to the right for half a mile, and pulled up his horse.

"This here's a mesa we're on and it drops off sharp just ahead a piece. Yuh can look down on the springs in a big arroyo," he said quietly. "If yore greasers are campin' there, yuh'll be able to spit into their hats—always providin' they ain't got a guard up on the rim, in which case shootin' will start almost immediate now."

Pat nodded. "We'll leave the ponies here."

He swung off, ground-tied Sandy's horse, and pulled the long Winchester out of its saddle holster.

"Yuh aimin' for us to round up Pot Shot and his gang tonight?" asked Sam scathingly.

"Reckon you and I could do it if we had to, couldn't we?" Pat chuckled. "Let's see whether we catch anything."

Silently the pair worked their way through the scrub oak and mesquite toward the mesa rim. Suddenly Pat froze. Then he dropped down behind a big yucca plant. Sam was only a fraction of a second behind him. Almost at the same instant they had both seen a dark shape silhouetted against the sky a hundred yards ahead and to the left.

"I ain't sure it ain't a cow," whispered Sam.

"I am. Cut back and then move to the right."

On their hands and knees they crawled back some fifty yards, and, still on all fours, Stevens led off in a wide sweep to the right. It was rough going through the mesa brush. By the time they reached the rim far to the north, their faces and hands were torn and bleeding from the scrub oak and tiny cactus spikes. Pat started crawling back along the rim toward the spot they'd been working for in the first place.

Below them in the arroyo all was black and still. Then

they heard the whinny of a nervous horse, followed by the sudden trampling of many restless hooves. Sam grabbed Pat's ankle in his excitement.

"By God, yuh're right!" he muttered.

But Pat was already creeping forward again. A few yards, and he stopped. Almost below him he could see the soft glow of embers. Then a dark figure detached itself from the shadows, flung some wood on the fire, and dropped back into the shadows again. In a few seconds the flames caught and threw out an uncertain, leaping circle of light where a moment before there had been nothing but night. As the flames leaped up, Pat could make out two figures lying on the ground by the fire, rolled up in blankets, heads on their saddles.

Two, and the watcher on the mesa made three. He watched, for there were five unaccounted for. There would probably be a sentinel at the mouth of the arroyo. Still four missing. It was a cold night. Why weren't they near the fire?

Minute after minute he waited, with Sam shifting impatiently.

"Sam," he finally murmured. "These are our boys—but only some of 'em. Don't suppose the pack has split up, do you?"

"Couldn't split too many ways for me," muttered Sam. "If there's few enough of 'em, we could slip up quiet, cut down on 'em tonight and there'd be that many fewer to worry about tomorrow."

But Pat shook his head. "Can't just go shooting 'em down."

"Why in hell not?"

" 'Cause I'm Sheriff now—sworn in to enforce the law. We got to try and capture those coyotes *alive*. An officer of the law ain't suppose to go ridin' around lettin' daylight into folks unless he has to."

"But they're outlaws! Yuh gone plumb crazy?"

It was too dark to see Sam's face, but from his voice it was obvious that he thought Pat *had* gone mad.

"And they're goin' to be tried legally, convicted, and hanged—if we can do it," said Pat flatly. "Get that into your thick head."

Sam groaned. "I never did have no use for the law," he muttered. "Well, what the hell are we doin' out here, then? Payin' a friendly call? Yuh ain't really figurin' on the two of us mixin' up with eight greasers, are you, if what we got to do is rope and tie 'em?"

"Tonight we're just goin' to wrangle some horses—nice and quiet if we can. You stay here, watch the greaser on the mesa, and cover me the best you can if anything starts. Don't pay any attention to noise, unless it's shootin'. I'm slippin' down into camp. Here, hang on to my rifle."

Pat loosened the Colts in his holsters and warily started down the precipitous sandy hill. He slipped, and a small avalanche of pebbles and shale rolled noisily down from where he had frozen. But the figures by the fire did not stir, and after a few moments he began working down again.

Finally, he reached the bottom. The fire was about twenty-five yards down the arroyo, and beyond he could hear horses moving. Except for the two figures by the fire, there was no other sign of life.

He pulled a gun out, and stealthily began a wide circle around the fire toward the horses. It wasn't long before he could make them out, a black mass, huddled together in a rope corral strung on some elder trees. And fifteen yards away, a smaller scattered group, staked out where they could get a little grazing. Apparently the Mexicans were playing safe and not mixing up two strange lots of horses.

If those horses could be stampeded out of the arroyo and have it seem as though they'd done the job themselves! For under the circumstances he'd just as soon Touslin's gang thought they were in the clear and that trouble was far to the north. Those men by the fire were asleep and——

Suddenly the quiet was shattered by a shot from the mesa above—and a second shot.

Sam and the guard!

Pat whipped out his second gun, and, wheeling about toward the campfire, crouched down.

The two figures had sprung to life, and out of the shadows came four more! They were talking excitedly in Spanish, apparently arguing as to what to do.

There were three more shots from above, and then quiet.

Pat's brain was racing. Get back up to Sam? He'd never make it. An almost impossible climb, and the Mexicans would spot him. But they'd have a hard time getting up that cliff, too, so Sam was probably all right. He and the guard were just sniping at each other, and no one could beat Sam at that game.

He'd better get out of the high grass himself, he thought grimly. In a moment they'd be stumbling over him if they started for their horses.

Pat swore softly to himself. This certainly had hamstrung him as far as recovering the Bar ES ponies went—or had it? There might be still time——

He holstered his guns, and, on his hands and knees, worked swiftly around to the far side of the rope corral. As he came close to the restless horses, they heard him and began to mill nervously.

As Pat rose to his feet, he heard more shots from the mesa. He pulled out his bowie knife and walked slowly and deliberately toward the Bar ES horses. They were in a huddle as far away as they could get from him. When he felt the rope, he stopped. Fifteen seconds and he had sawed through one strand of rawhide. Ten seconds for the second, and dropping, it left a gap between two trees the width of a big gate. Pat cut off a length of rawhide about six feet long, made a slip noose, and put it between his teeth.

The he cautiously entered the corral, and one hand on the rope circled around to the opposite side where the horses

were. The horses started away as he approached, moving toward the gap in the corral. He urged them on softly, not wanting to stampede them until just the right moment.

One pony found the gap and trotted out. Another and another. And it was about time, for Pat could hear running footsteps behind him. He jumped toward the horses nearest him, lashing them with his rope and started them stampeding after the leaders.

The Mexicans knew something was wrong now. They were shouting, and coming on fast. And finally the whine of a bullet warned Pat he'd been seen.

He jumped for the gap in the corral as the last pony slipped through, leaped for his back, and bending low with his arms around the neck of the plunging bronco, dug his heels in. They were piling lead in on him now, but they couldn't see in the dark, and the shooting behind the herd of already excited ponies was just what Pat wanted. The mad race swept off down the arroyo away from the camp.

Pat passed his rope around his pony's neck, and worked the noose up over his head. Just under the jaw, he yanked it tight into a hackamore, and then began to ride.

It was a desperate race—down the black canyon over rough, rocky ground he had never seen, riding into heaven only knew what. Not slackening his pace he hazed the horses on, right and left, further and further away from the camp.

Finally the ridges on each side began dropping away and widening out. Pat pressed his herd to the right, and a few minutes later found himself in a broad valley with the mesa far behind him. He swung the herd north up the valley, and kept them running for another quarter of an hour.

To his surprise there did not seem to be any pursuit. Apparently the Mexicans never dreamed that the marauders were but two in number, and were being cautious.

At last, Pat decided it was safe to scatter the Bar ES string, and charging into the herd, drove them out in all di-

rections. What had been a moment before a compact organized herd suddenly disintegrated into a score of single horses, each seeking its own safety.

When he was sure that they'd scattered so widely that they'd never be rounded up again that night, Pat swung east and rode for the mesa. What had been a sheer bluff below was here a gentle incline up from the valley, and he burned leather all the way. For Sam had been on his own too long.

Just as he reached the table-land and turned south he heard the sound of hooves. He reined up sharply and listened. It was two horses, moving toward him at a slow trot. He slipped off his pony, and found what shelter he could behind some scrub oak, and waited, one hand holding his restless pony, the other a gun. Nearer and nearer the horses came, straight toward him. But it was pitch black now, the stars were hidden, and he could see nothing. It might be Sam. It might be——

Some thirty feet away the figure of a man on horseback leading a second horse loomed out of the night, and passed by. Pat was almost sure it was Sam, but he had to be sure. He waited a few moments, then——

"Wh-o-o—Wh-o-o."

It was their old owl signal, and he heard the horseman pull up, with a sharp exclamation.

"Wh-o-o—Wh-o-o—Wh-o-o," came back.

Pat grinned happily in the dark. "Top of the evenin' to you, Sam," he called out.

In an instant Sam was beside him. "Yuh all right?" he demanded anxiously.

"*Me* all right? What the hell?" Pat laughed softly. "I ain't been amusin' myself by getting in any gunfights. What you been doin' up on the mesa anyhow? Just can't keep out of trouble, can you?"

Sam snorted indignantly. "Lucky for yuh yuh wasn't up on that mesa. Yuh'd never have got away alive. . . . Come on, let's get out of heah. Let's ride."

Pat swung over his own horse, and they started out, leading the Bar ES pony.

"What yuh done with all our hawsses?" demanded Sam. "Heard yuh runnin' 'em off. Forgot how to hold a string together?—but yuh never was much of a hand with hosses," he added scathingly. "That's why I was ridin' over to give yuh a hand."

"I scattered 'em. Thought you and me would go home and get some sleep, and let Ezra do a little wrangling in the morning."

Sam grunted. "Well, yuh sure have ruined *one* of our ponies," he growled, turning to look at the Bar ES pony Pat was leading. "He'll never get his wind back. Don't yuh know better than to go racin' a good hoss around like a crazy fool?"

"Thought you might be needin' help," Pat chuckled.

"*Me* needin' help? Shucks, I didn't need no help. I was just givin' the greasers somethin' to think about so's yuh could run the hawsses off."

"What happened?" Pat demanded seriously.

"Nothin' much. Some coyote sneaked up on me—reckon it was the guard—and started dustin' me with his hogleg, an' I thought as how I'd better make him keep his head down. Then when I seen some more of the gang comin' up the bluff, I recollected yuh didn't want none of those greasers hurt in this little game we're playin', and not bein' as good a shot as I used to be—bein' afraid I might hit one of 'em by mistake—I cut back to our ponies and vamoosed . . . Yuh get all the hawsses out?"

"All the Bar ES string. I left 'em their own ponies."

"That was right nice of yuh. Wouldn't want to strand a gang of poisonous snakes out here without anything to ride, would you?" Sam asked sarcastically.

"Picketed," explained Pat.

The two fell silent, and rode steadily on at a fast running walk until they arrived at the Bar ES.

Ezra and Darcy were waiting at the door of the ranch house, their figures silhouetted against the light.

Ezra surveyed the one extra horse in disgust. "Don't seem as how you done very good," he drawled. "The Bar ES string used to be some bigger. That ain't even one of the *good* ponies."

"Just brought you back one, Ezra, so's you could do some wranglin' in the mornin'," explained Pat.

"I'll take the broncs down to the corral," Darcy volunteered.

"Thanks, kid. I reckon they're safe for tonight."

"Yuh'll find our string scattered somewhere between Wyomin' and the Territory," Sam drawled to Ezra. "Pat thought they looked hungry and ought to get some grass tonight—and Ezra, when yuh ride, leave yuhr guns to home," he added.

"Leave my guns home?" Ezra frowned. "What are you ——"

"Lest yuh might be tempted by the devil to let loose and do some shootin'."

"You gone crazy?" Ezra demanded.

"No, *I* ain't gone crazy. But seems as how we're goin' to be workin' for the government, and the government don't like folks to go around shootin' off their guns. From now on, if anyone rides up to you—especially a greaser—and pulls a gun and starts shootin', yuh jest talk him out of it, see?"

"What the hell——"

"And then," went on Sam gleefully, "when he realizes that yuh ain't goin' to hurt him, and starts to walk away, yuh run up behind him, soft-like, and sprinkle some salt on his tail and capture him—or mebbe," Sam demanded, turning to Pat anxiously, "yuh don't want us to use no salt? Salt smarts some if you got an open——"

"You can go to hell," Pat announced. "I'm goin' to bed. —When you boys get ready to ride in the mornin', wake me up."

By seven o'clock the next morning, Ezra had all the Bar ES horses safely in the corral.

He found Sam and Darcy busy in the ranch house kitchen which looked as though a hurricane had struck it. Scattered around on the floor were blankets, ponchos, cooking utensils, supplies, ammunition, rifles, a sheepskin coat, and almost everything else that a man would need on the open range.

Sam was rubbing a pair of boots with tallow.

"Goin' wading?" Ezra demanded.

Sam shook his head. "Not if I kin help it. But there's snow comin' in a few days. . . . Get all the cayuses?"

"Sure. They all came back to the range, of course."

"What yuh ridin'?"

"Cactus. He's rough, But I ain't never seen him tired yet."

"He will be on *this* trip," Sam promised grimly. "I reckon I'll take that sorrel devil."

"Why, he ain't really broken yet! He's a regular outlaw."

"Waal, if I can't ride him, I'll ask yuh to top him off for me every mornin'," drawled Sam.

"Where in hell is Pat?"

"Asleep," said Sandy with a frown. "I tried to get him out an hour ago, but he cursed me blue and told me not to be waking him up till you got back. . . . I don't figure how Pat's runnin' this show, anyhow. I'd have thought that he'd have brought back a couple of ponies last night, and gone right after the greasers. He knew where they were, and it would have been easy."

Sam chuckled. "Yuh ain't the first one who's tried to figger how Pat plays his cyards. He always seems to be makin' a damn fool of hisself and then when the call comes, he lays down four aces."

"He sure don't seem to be in any hurry to catch up with them Mexes," Ezra pondered. "They're miles away by now. Seems loco to me."

"Stop tryin' to think, Ezra," snapped Sam, "and get yuhr kit ready. When Pat does decide to roll, he'll want to roll fast."

There was an amused chuckle from the doorway. Pat had been standing there listening.

Darcy flushed as he realized that he'd probably been overheard. Ezra just looked sullen.

"Sam," Pat drawled, "these here two boys sure are fire-eaters, ain't they? Just can't wait to get after them greasers."

"First time I ever known Ezra to be hurryin' towards trouble," grinned Sam.

Pat shook his head sadly, picked up a rifle and sighted it out of the window. "Yeah, young Darcy now, you might expect him to go off half-cocked. He's just a kid. But *Ezra!* Good old steady Ezra! What's happened to Ezra, Sam? Must have been feedin' him raw meat down here at the Bar ES."

"Ezra's gettin' old," Sam explained in a low voice just loud enough for Ezra to hear. "Mind ain't what it used to be."

Pat looked at the big red-headed man solicitously. His one eye was smouldering with anger, and it was obvious that he was restraining himself with difficulty. Only one more touch was needed.

"Not what it used to be?" repeated Pat slowly. "Never was *very* good, Sam."

Ezra exploded. "You two black-tongued, yellow-bellied, white-livered bushwhackers, you, damn you——" He spluttered off into incoherence.

"Must have overheard us talkin' about him," Pat said regretfully.

"But he understood what we was sayin'," added Sam brightly. "That's right encouragin'."

Pat strolled across the kitchen, swung up on the rough table, pulled out his knife and started whittling a stick of kindling. "Ain't there any breakfast around this hole?" he

demanded. "I'm right hungry."

Sam got busy over the stove.

"Pat, what are we hangin' around for?" Sandy asked. "Those coyotes'll be twenty-five miles away before we get started."

"More likely forty, the way they ride," Pat said calmly.

"Well, what's it for?" frowned Sam, handing Pat a plate stacked high with bacon and beans and flapjacks floating in thick black molasses. "I know yuh've got something up yore sleeve, but I don't see it any more than these two does. Ain't yuh just makin' things harder?"

Pat shook his head. "This is how I got it running. First place, four men can't just ride up on eight jaspers who ain't very friendly, and not get some shot up *if they're expected.* And what's the use of gettin' drilled unless you have to? Now, those outlaws are bein' right watchful up here so close to Dutch Springs. You saw that last night, Sam. Give 'em a couple of days to get south into the mountains, near home, and let 'em think no one's interested in 'em, and they'll be a lot easier to rope."

"But over the state line, Pat, that star of yours don't mean much."

Pat looked at Darcy with a twinkle in his eye. "Sandy," he drawled, "this here star ain't worth a damn *either* side of the state line. Pot Shot's not the man to be impressed by no star. Soon as he crosses the line, he'll figure he's safe, and that's what I want. Another thing," he went on, "their horses. Look at the way they're pushin' them. Way up north, and a big swing, and down to here by last night. That's covering ground. When a greaser admits his horse is tired, the horse is near dead. And they know they need fresh horses, or they wouldn't have been after the Bar ES string. Give 'em a couple of days more with those dead beat horses, and they won't be able to move nearly so fast as they can move now. All we got to do then is catch 'em where we want 'em, and they won't be ridin' off and thumbin' their

noses at us."

Sam chuckled. "What'd I tell yuh, boys?"

"And last of all, when I'm takin' on twice my weight in a scrap," said Pat, "I aim to choose my own ground. We'll just mosey out in an hour or so, pick up their trail, over by where they were camping last night, take it easy for a while, and all we got to do is catch up with 'em before they get back to their own range around Santa Fé. 'Cause that's where they're headin'. And I'm bettin' they cut through the mountains near here. . . . Now are you three galoots satisfied?"

"I'll say so!" muttered Sandy fervently.

"Then you better enjoy your last meal under a roof for a while."

"How much grub yuh want us to take?"

"All you can carry on your saddle. Me and Sandy've got enough for a week."

"Why don't we take a pack horse?" demanded Ezra.

"'Cause yuh're goin' to have all yuh can do to take care of yuhr own hide, without nursing any pack animal!" Sam answered. "Anything special to take along outside of a regular layout, Pat?"

Pat nodded. "Two ropes, anyhow, and you got any calked steel shoes for your horses in case it gets snowin'?"

Sam nodded.

"All right. . . . Well, seein' as how you boys are in a hurry, we'll get goin' then as soon as you're ready. . . . Come over here, Ezra and Sam. Might as well swear you two blacklegs in as deputies right now." He turned to Sandy Darcy. "It sure is depressin' to see what the dignity of law is comin' to nowadays, when you got to make Deputy Sheriffs out of such as these," he said mournfully. "Ezra, raise up your right hand and——"

An hour and a half later, just as a few solid gray clouds began to roll up over the mountains to the southwest, Pat swung into the saddle, turned his roan around, and in-

spected his three deputies critically. Their saddles were packed high and solid, from the swell in front to the cantle behind. Rifles hung in saddle holsters. Warm sheepskin chaps, heavy sheepskin lined coats, Colts hanging heavy right and left, and shoulder belts for rifle ammunition.

"Well, if your ponies can carry all that without fallin' down, I reckon everything will be jake," he drawled. "Ezra, you got your Bible? You got most everything else."

"And, Ez, that salt for their tails?" queried Sam anxiously.

"Go to hell," Ezra snorted.

"All right. Let's see. Two and two makes four. I reckon we're all here. Let's go." Pat pointed to the gray clouds over the mountains, and added dryly, "Before we get snowed in."

4. "That Pot Shot—He's Bad—"

Some twenty miles to the southwest as the crow flies, a girl was standing by the doorway of a small log cabin watching those same ominous snow clouds. Her great black eyes were somber and her mouth trembled a little as she watched the gray clouds pour over the mountains just above her.

Those clouds meant the beginning of another winter—a third winter here under the mountains. And winter in that little hollow in the foothills, sheltered as it was, meant months of complete isolation from the world. It meant months of speaking to no one but her father, months of snowbound inactivity, months of jerky and salt pork varied by the game that her father shot or brought in occasionally from the traps from which he made his living.

Alice Bond involuntarily asked herself for the hundredth time why her father had insisted on coming north into this cold unfriendly country from the temperate land of the pueblos where they'd lived so long. Then immediately, as always, she remembered her mother's tragic death three

years before, and answered her own question.

She sighed and her tall, lithe body half turned toward the dark cabin behind her.

"Dad," she cried gayly, "come on out if you want to see snow on its way."

Old Asa Bond appeared in the doorway, blinking his pale blue watery eyes.

"Snow?" he asked skeptically. "It's too early for snow."

"Look at those clouds."

"Hm-m—wish I'd gone over to town last week for what we need," he muttered. "We're low on flour, beans and coffee."

"And a lot of other things," Alice murmured.

"Yeah, but all a man needs to live is flour, beans and coffee."

"And tobacco!" Alice laughed. "I'd hate to go through a winter alone with you if you ran out of shag."

Old Bond chuckled. "You're right, Al, I forgot the tobacco. Reckon I'd better take the mules and pack off for town right quick."

"Think you can get back in time in case it starts to snow?"

"I'll have to," Bond said dryly. "But it's only forty miles. I'll be back day after tomorrow. Even if it does start today, it wont be too heavy for us. . . . You make out a list of whatever we need. And fix me something ready to eat so's I won't have to stop on the way. I'll get the mules ready."

Asa Bond shambled around the cabin to the lean-to barn and small corral back of the cabin.

"You want to take those three mountain lion skins into town?" demanded Alice.

"Those cat skins? They ain't any good, the season being what it was. They won't bring any kind of price, but I might as well. . . . Hurry up with that grub. I want to get goin'."

Alice entered the cabin, and began to prepare and pack some food for her father's journey. While the coffee was

boiling for his canteen, she rolled the lion skins into a bundle that he could tie on the pack saddle. Then she started the list of essentials for the long winter: tobacco, flour, coffee, baking powder, beans, salt pork, sugar, salt, molasses, dried apples, eight yards of brown woolen cloth for a dress. She'd like a few books to read, she thought wistfully, but her father would think she was crazy, and he probably couldn't get any in town anyway.

Suddenly she started up from the pine bench, puzzled. Was that the sound of horses? No one ever came upon them here except an occasional trapper or prospector or an Indian who had strayed up over the pass from the south. But it *was* horses, lots of them. She ran to the window of the cabin and peered out through a hole in the oiled paper that served for glass.

There they were, three hundred yards away down the valley, halted now and clustered in a group apparently talking. There were seven of them—no, eight. Their great wide hats and their clothes branded them as from the south.

"Mexicans!" Alice muttered uneasily. "What are they doing here?"

"Dad! Dad!" she called out in a low voice through the log wall that separated the cabin from the stable.

"I'm busy," he replied from the other side of the wall. Obviously he had not heard the strangers.

"Dad, listen," Alice cried urgently. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes," came his querulous voice. "What do you want?"

"There are eight men down the hollow on horseback. They've seen the cabin, and are talking about us. I don't like their looks. Slip out of the barn, and in the side window of the cabin on the farside without being seen. Hurry, Dad."

Swiftly Alice crossed to the door, and pushing it from behind, swung it slowly to. Then she dropped the heavy wooden bar into place. She flew to the corner of the cabin where her father kept his guns, and before old Bond's body dark-

ened the window, she had ammunition and two rifles and Asa's big revolver on the pine table, and a thirty-eight Colt slung around her own waist.

"Why, Al, what's all this?" Bond protested mildly. "Just because some strangers ride up, there no reason——"

"They're greasers!" she said shortly.

"Well, girl, there are plenty of good Mexicans."

Alice was peering out of the corner of the small window. The horsemen were still arguing and gesticulating about something.

"What are eight Mexicans doing up here?" she demanded. "It doesn't make sense."

"Mebbe they brought some stock up from the south."

"Through the mountains? Nonsense, Dad. They behave to me as though they didn't want to be seen."

"I'll go out and talk to them. We've got nothing they could want."

"Wait! Maybe they'll ride off. Here, Dad buckle on your gun."

In tense silence they waited. It seemed an interminable time. In reality it was less than a minute.

Finally the horsemen started forward at a trot, led by a short, stocky man on a big bay horse.

Alice noticed that the men she could see had revolvers in their hands.

"It don't look good," admitted the old trapper. "Whatever happens, Al, you stay inside the cabin, see?"

Right up to within ten yards of the cabin they rode, and then pulled up. Alice shivered when she saw the leader's face. He was swarthy, with almost no chin. When he opened his mouth to speak to one of his companions, she noticed that all his upper front teeth were gone. His crew were as hard a lot of men as she'd ever seen.

"I'll go out," muttered Bond.

"Wait!"

Suddenly the short, swarthy man whipped up his gun and

fired two shots into the air.

"Hi, you inside. Out! Out here!"

"Ask him what he wants," Alice whispered.

"What do you want?" old Bond called out in his shrill, piping voice.

"Want to talk with you, damn it. All of you, out with you!"

"Don't do it, Dad."

"I can talk from in here!"

"You come out, or we'll smash the door, sabe? And pull you out."

Slowly Bond picked up a rifle, then put it down. He wouldn't have any use for a rifle at such short range. Then he crossed to the door, and pushed back the bar, and swung the door open on its leather hinges.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded.

At the sight of the wizened, gray-haired little man, one of the Mexicans burst into laughter. and rolled out something in Spanish which Bond translated as meaning that this bird was too old and tough for roasting.

"You live here? This your hacienda?" the leader demanded with a contemptuous gesture.

"Yes. I live here."

"You alone?"

Bond thought for a moment, wondering whether there was any use trying to conceal his daughter's presence.

"No," he said, "I'm not alone."

"Well, God dammit, who else is here? Why don't he come out?"

"The only other person here is my daughter."

"Oh, ho! Your daughter, eh?" He turned to one of his henchmen and spoke in Spanish too quickly for Bond to follow.

The man dismounted, and came toward Bond.

"Give him your gun," commanded the short man.

"I'll keep my gun," Bond announced calmly. "Stay away

from me, you, or I'll drill you."

The Mexican could not understand English, but the old man's flashing eyes told him what was meant. He looked back at his leader for instructions.

The short man's eyes had narrowed into slits. "You give him your gun, sabe?" he said softly.

"Ain't I seen you before?" Bond demanded thoughtfully. "Ain't your name Touslin?"

The man shifted in his saddle, but did not answer.

Bond nodded. "Touslin," he said with certainty. "Pot Shot Touslin, from down around Taos and Santa Fé way. I know all about you."

"Well, what of it?" snarled Touslin.

"Sort of far away from your own range, ain't you?"

"Put your hands up, or I shoot you," Touslin ordered, an angry gleam in his ferret eyes.

There was no mistaking that the Mexican meant what he said, and his gun was already in his hand. Slowly, unwillingly, Bond raised his hands. The Mexican near him darted in, unslung his Colt, strapped it around his own waist, and then felt Bond's shoulder, armpit, and leg for a possible knife.

"Now you can put your hands down," Pot Shot sneered. "And we can talk. You got any horses?"

"No, I've got no horses."

Pot Shot Touslin surveyed the corral fence, the watering trough, and began to curse.

"You're lying, you damn gringo!"

"I've got no horses," Bond repeated stolidly.

Touslin ground out an order, and one of his men rode around to the back of the cabin. In a few moments he reappeared, leading Bond's two small mules, one with a pack saddle, and the other saddled for riding.

Pot Shot surveyed them with disgust, but then his face brightened. More orders in Spanish, and several of the men dismounted and began to unload packs from their own

overburdened animals. One Mexican disappeared into the stable, and emerged with a second pack saddle, which he threw down on the ground, and then began to unstrap Bond's riding saddle.

Bond watched them dismayed. On those mules depended his and Alice's safety and their lives. Without them——

"You can't take them mules!" he protested excitedly. "I got to have them mules!"

"I need them myself, amigo," Touslin snarled.

"I've got to get food with them mules for the winter!"

"Perhaps you won't need food for winter." Touslin gave an ugly laugh. "Now, what food have you got here now, eh?"

"Not much," muttered the trapper. "I was goin' off today to pack supplies in."

"We'll see, we'll see."

Bond had been edging back toward the doorway, a few inches at a time. With his foot he could feel a sharp rock that he knew was only two feet from the threshold. He whirled sharply and darted for the low opening.

There was a sharp report, and he plunged forward, his face grinding into the dirt floor of the cabin. Alice slammed the door behind him, shot the bar home, and dropped to her knees over the prostrate body of her father.

"Dad, Dad," she moaned, raising his head a little.

The old man's closed eyelids were twitching.

"Got me," he murmured. "Where'd he hit me, Al?"

"Just in the side," she lied.

There was a tiny trickle of blood beginning to flow from the center of his back.

"In the side?" he whispered weakly. "Feel paralyzed, Al. Sure it's the side? . . . Listen, Al, they're talking outside. They'll be in here in a moment. That Pot Shot—he's bad. Al, you take a gun, and if he——"

There was a sudden convulsion, and Alice Bond felt a dead, heavy weight in her arms.

Gently she let her burden sink down to the floor, and then, her face white and determined, rose to her feet. She crossed to the table, picked up a rifle, and turned to the window.

But from her window she could not see the man whom her father had called Touslin. Two or three of his gang were within her range, but it was Touslin's gun that had smoked when her father fell, and he was the one she was looking for.

She felt strangely calm. She was about to shoot a man, she told herself, shoot him dead. It was something she had to do. He'd shot her father in the back, and she was going to kill him.

But Touslin did not appear. The men she could see through her peephole seemed to be waiting for something.

Suddenly there was a crash of splintering wood at the door.

Alice wheeled from the window. A log had been driven through the door, but thanks to the great bar, it still held.

Another crash, and the leather hinges ripped. Another drive, and the door gave way.

She saw a confusion of faces in the doorway, and as she raised her rifle to fire she felt both her arms seized from behind in a grip of iron, and she was dragged back toward the window. The rifle dropped from her hands, and she was helpless in the hands of the man who had reached in through the window behind her. Every move she made was answered by an excruciating twist of her arm.

Touslin stepped over the high threshold of the cabin, and looked spitefully at the girl before him.

"So, Señorita, you were going to shoot, eh?"

Her eyes blazing and defiant, Alice did not reply.

"Your father, he was foolish man. When he says he know me, I know I have to kill him. Then the rat tried to get away!"

"You're a murderer!" Alice cried.

Pot Shot shrugged. "You gringos are fools," was all he said.

He threw a curt order over his shoulder and two of his gang entered. Systematically they began to tear the cabin apart, looking for whatever might be useful. Whatever Touslin wanted—foodstuff chiefly, arms, and ammunition, they carried out of the cabin. Everything else was dumped on the floor.

"Where do you keep your money?" Pot Shot demanded.

Alice set her lips.

Touslin ground out a Spanish word she did not understand, and she felt her wrist being twisted cruelly from behind.

"Where do you keep money—gold," Touslin repeated with an evil leer.

"There isn't any," groaned Alice.

"No? Everyone's got gold—some gold."

Her arm would break in a moment. But something in her forbade her yielding to this man. She'd have no use for her father's little sack of gold. She wouldn't live to use it. She knew that now, but even as she began to lose consciousness from the pain, she was determined not to speak.

Her swimming eyes saw Touslin approaching her slowly, his eyes evil, and for the first time she noticed his ear. It was slit, V-shaped.

"Where's your money?"

The voice seemed to come from very far away.

"Unless you tell, we'll burn the cabin—and maybe we'll try heat on you, too, Señorita. . . . Miguel! Pancho!"

Two more Mexicans burst into the cabin. Following Touslin's directions, one of them started to heat the iron poker in the small sheet iron stove. The other began to dump bedding, kindling, anything small and inflammable he could find into a corner of the cabin.

Pot Shot watched them, with his ugly smile all over his face. He rolled a cigarette while he waited. He lit it, smoked

it quickly in short, nervous puffs, then flicked it onto the floor, and crossed to the stove. He pulled out the iron poker. The end was glowing. He turned toward Alice.

"Well?" he snarled. "You say there's no gold or money?"

She shook her head weakly.

He began to walk toward her slowly, the red hot poker in his hand.

"Oh, God, no!" she moaned. "In the hollow log—behind me—under the window!"

As she spoke, she felt the grip on her wrists slacken. With a desperate wrench, her right hand was free. She flashed for the gun still hanging on her hip. She saw Touslin's raised arm. She heard the whistle of something swirling through the air, and that was the last she knew.

5. "Yuh Goin' to Make Her Deputy, Too?"

"Sam," said Pat pensively as the four men wound into the foothills toward evening, "Sam, what do you suppose Ezra'd be able to see if he had *two* eyes?"

"Too much," replied Sam dryly. "He wouldn't know how to take it all in."

"Sam, even you could have followed that trail today," retorted Ezra. "Or even Darcy. There wasn't nothin' to it."

All day long the rangy redhead had led them unerringly along the trail of Pot Shot Touslin and his gang. He was right. It hadn't been too difficult, for apparently the Mexicans, confident that they had thrown off any posse, were more anxious to cover ground than to conceal their tracks.

"They're about six hours ahead of us," Ezra decided. "Mebbe seven."

"How can you be tellin' that?" Sandy demanded.

Ezra shook his head. "Can't say how I know, kid, but I do. That track just says six or seven hours to me, and says it plain. You get to know track, same way animals know some things."

"How long yuh goin' to keep goin' today, Pat?" asked Sam.

"The next water we strike, we'll camp."

"No jerky tonight anyhow. We'll be eating fresh meat," exulted Sandy, looking down at the plump sage hens that hung all over his saddle. For what Sandy lacked in experience as a trailer he made up for as a marksman with a rifle. Even Pat had watched respectfully as the young Irishman had brought bird after bird down with the greatest of ease.

"There might be water right soon," decided Ezra.

Darcy grinned. "Will you be telling me now that you can smell water?"

Ezra nodded seriously. "I reckon I can. Leastwise, I can find it most times when there's any to find."

Pat was studying his three companions with satisfaction. It was a perfect team: young Darcy, reckless, fearless, as near a perfect shot as there was—and black Irish with blood in his eye; Sam, crafty, wise, experienced, a fighter who would stand by as long as he had one finger left to pull a trigger; and one-eyed Ezra, cautious, wary, with the strength and endurance of an ox, and although he never looked for trouble, once he was in it, he never left until everything was over—and with the keenest scent for a trail Pat had ever seen; Ezra was right, he knew a lot of things he couldn't give reasons for. Where he was short in reasoning power, he was long on instinct.

"Pat was sure right about what them greasers were doin' to their ponies," Sam reflected. "They ain't travellin' near as fast as they was when they started off last night from the mesa spring."

They had left the rolling plains behind them now for good, and were working up into the low hills under the Culebra Range. The country was already changing. There was less grass and sage, and the scrub oak was getting thicker. Dark piñon trees dotted the landscape, and yellow pines. Great outcroppings of granite hinted of the solid

masses of rock ahead of them.

They came over the crest of a hill, and Ezra pulled up.

"There's water in the hollow ahead, or I'm an Injun," he announced confidently.

Pat pulled his old felt hat down further against the sharp glare of the setting sun.

"Might be," he said. "I see a cabin over yonder, anyhow."

Then he wheeled his horse sharply. "Here, get back here, all you, below the crest. Just a chance the greasers are usin' that cabin tonight."

"They'd have cut around," Sandy protested. "They aren't lookin' for company just now."

"May be a deserted cabin," said Pat. "There's no smoke."

Ezra scratched his head. "Seems how someone told me last spring as how some loony old trapper had located up in these parts somewhere. You remember, Sam?"

Sam shook his head.

"We'll slip around behind the hill and see what's what," announced Pat.

Silently the four skirted the hollow, always keeping below the crest of the hills that surrounded it, until they were directly behind the cabin. Then Pat dismounted, and on foot climbed up to where he could overlook the basin. He stood there motionless by a big pine tree for a few minutes, his eyes alert for any sign of life.

"Looks all right," he called back to his companions. "Quiet as a graveyard. There may be someone in the cabin, I don't know. But Touslin ain't around 'cause there're no horses.—Bring my pony up here, and we'll go on down."

It was a pretty sheer drop from where they were, and the descent was mostly a slide with the horses back on their haunches. They hit the bottom a hundred yards from the cabin.

"Touslin's *been* here," said Pat grimly. "Tracks all over. And they spent some time here, too."

"Must be deserted, then," Sam decided.

Pat was frowning. "Don't seem any good reason for wastin' time around a deserted cabin unless they were campin'. Those greasers are in a hurry."

Ezra had ridden off to the right, and a few hundred feet away had stopped. After a few moments he wheeled and galloped back to where the three were standing.

"Touslin's been and gone," he said, "and he's got two pack mules now."

"Sure of that?" Pat snapped. "He didn't have 'em when he hit the hollow, did he?"

Ezra looked at his chief reproachfully. "I'd a told you, Pat, if anything like that had happened."

"Mebbe two of his mares foaled," grinned Sandy.

"I don't know where he got 'em, but he's got two mules now," repeated Ezra stubbornly. "They're small mules, packed heavy, and he's leadin' 'em, not drivin' 'em."

Without a word, Pat started for the cabin, and they followed him.

Twenty feet away, he reined up.

"Hallo, in there!" he called out.

There was no answer.

"If that cabin's deserted, it ain't been deserted long," said Sam, looking around carefully.

"See the door?" asked Pat quietly as he dismounted.

"What used to be a door," muttered Sandy, disengaging himself with difficulty from his packs and his sage hens, and dropping to the ground.

He reached the cabin window just as Pat reached the door and peered into the murky darkness.

With an oath, Pat stepped quickly inside, and bent over the still body of old Bond.

"I reckon this is your loony trapper, Ezra," he muttered over his shoulder. "Shot in the back, too.—Sam, how long you think he's been dead?"

Sam felt of Bond's hands, his arms, legs, tried to move

his fingers.

"Stiff as a board," he announced. "Five or six hours, mebbe."

"That checks with Ezra's trail reading," Pat nodded. "The sons of——"

Then his head jerked up at a startled exclamation from Darcy at the window.

"There's—another one! Over in the corner!" Sandy cried, "And it looks like a——"

"By God, 'tis a girl!" yelled Sam. "Pat——"

But Stevens was already there. And Darcy, having wormed through the window, was beside him.

"Turn her over, kid," Pat muttered gruffly. "Wish to hell we had a light."

Gently the young Irishman took hold of the girl's shoulders, and turned her body over.

The white oval of a face loomed out of the darkness. The eyes were closed, and the expression on her face was as though she were asleep. The side of her temple was dark red with clotted blood, and a deep gash ran over the front of her head.

"Knocked her over the head," Sandy whispered in horror. "She's just a girl! Mary, Mother of——!" he cried as he leaped to his feet and stared down at the body as though he were terrified of it.

"What's the matter, kid?" asked Pat quietly.

"She's still *warm*," Darcy shouted. "I just felt it! She's still warm—and soft. She's all but alive, Pat Stevens."

Swiftly he dropped down to his knees again and felt of her pulse. If it was beating, it was so feeble he couldn't feel it. He ripped open her woollen dress, and put his hand on her heart.

His three companions hung over him tensely.

"See if you can find a candle," Pat ordered.

"I think—it's beating," whispered Sandy. "I think she's alive."

"Here, kid, let me see," muttered Sam, pushing Sandy aside. "I know more about this than yuh do. . . . Sure she's alive, you damn fool."

Ezra had found a tallow candle, and the sputtering light suddenly threw weird shadows around the cabin.

"Bring that light here," Sam growled.

As the light fell on the white face of Alice Bond, Darcy gasped.

"She's beautiful!" he whispered. "Look at her face. She's beautiful!"

"Yuh God damned fool," spluttered Sam. "Get the hell away from here. . . . Pat, yuh got any brandy?"

"In my pack, Sandy. Get it."

Sandy jumped for the door.

"Find some blankets or something to slip under her."

"Couldn't we get her into the bunk over there?"

Sam nodded. "She's just a slip of a girl—like a willow. . . . Ezra, fix up that bunk. . . . My God, Pat, that half breed of yuhrs and his coyotes are worse'n Injuns. I seen a lot of bad actin' in my time, but I don't recollect——"

Darcy was back with a small flask. "Is she—too far gone, Sam?" he asked.

"I don't know," the old man snapped. "If yuh'll stop askin' questions and get a fire goin' in the stove, we may do something for her. Get this cabin roarin' warm, and get some more light from somewhere."

In a few moments, they had her on the bunk. With a spoon, Pat was forcing brandy between her half-open lips, a few drops at a time.

"Is it concussion, do you think?" he asked as Sam ran his fingers over her skull.

"Can't tell. Mebbe just stunned. If that's it, she'll come to before long. We ought to get her out of them tight clothes," Sam growled. "But I—I don't like somehow, to ——" He stopped, embarrassed.

"I'll undress her," Pat said quietly. "See if there's a flan-

nel shirt around, and some blankets. . . . And, Ezra, you better tend to the horses and get camp goin'. Looks as though we'll spend the night here. Sandy, get the old man out of the way—in the back room—and straighten up in here. If this girl *does* pull through, we don't want her——"

It wasn't long before Pat had the quiet figure swathed in warm blankets. "Her heart's stronger," he announced. "I can feel her pulse now."

"Could I wash off her face a little?" Sandy asked diffidently, appearing at the side of the bunk with a pan of warm water.

Pat looked at him queerly. "If you want," he muttered. "What's happened to you, Sandy?"

Darcy flushed. "Nothing's happened to me, but——"

"All right, kid, I'm bridle wise," Pat grinned. "Your girl's goin' to live I reckon. You can take care of her for a while. Take it easy, when you're washing her face, and don't start that gash in her head bleedin' again. Give her a few drops of brandy every few minutes—I'm goin' to help Ezra and Sam. This may be a hospital for women, but we men got to eat—and Sandy!" he called back from the doorway.

Sandy looked up.

"You better wash your *own* face while you're at it. If that poor girl comes to and sees you around the way you are, she'll think you're Pot Shot Touslin."

Sandy Darcy was still hovering over Alice half an hour later when her eyelids fluttered for the first time. His first instinct was to call Pat, but then he decided not. If, when she regained consciousness, she saw too many strange faces around, she'd be terrified, he told himself. Carefully he fed her a little more brandy, and felt her pulse. It was beating strongly now, and she was breathing regularly.

Ezra shuffled into the cabin. "How's the gal?" he asked anxiously.

"Better," said Darcy shortly. "Say, Ezra, would you be

taking a look at my horse's off hind leg for me? It seemed as how he was just a little lame as we rode in."

"Didn't notice anythin' wrong," said Ezra, surprised.

"Take a look anyhow," urged Sandy persuasively. "I got to watch this girl. Pat told me not to be leaving her."

Just as Ezra disappeared, her eyes suddenly opened.

Sandy watched, tense and silent.

For a minute her eyes were blank. Then slowly as she regained consciousness, she began to remember. Her eyes widened in terror, and she moaned piteously. Her lips moved, but made no words.

Sandy waited a moment longer, and then spoke very gently. "It's all right, ma'am. It's all over. It's safe you are now, and with friends."

His voice reached her, and she turned her head weakly. At the first sight of him, the terror reflected on her face seemed to grow more intense. Then his honest Irish face and his broad, friendly smile reassured her.

"A nip more brandy, now, will do you good," he urged.

This time he gave her a full spoonful, and she coughed as the fiery dose burned down her throat. Her eyes closed with pain.

"My head," she whispered.

"It's a nasty head that you've got," Sandy agreed. "But it'll soon be better."

"Where—what——"

"You'll not be talking just now," he commanded. "You've had an accident. Just rest. You're in your own cabin, and those greasy devils are far away, and you're safe among friends."

"Who are you?" she murmured.

"They call me Sandy Darcy."

Her eyes closed again, and she lay very still for a few minutes. Then suddenly she started up convulsively as she remembered.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dad!"

"Hush, now, hush," Darcy soothed her as one does a child.

"They shot him! He's—dead!" And she burst into a paroxysm of sobs.

Sandy forced her shoulders gently back on the bunk. "Oh, my poor lass, be easy, be easy," he urged in his soft crooning Irish voice. "There's no use my tryin' to tell you what you'd be knowing was a lie, but don't take it so hard. All the troubles are over for your poor father, and it's the joy and peace of Paradise that he'll be having soon."

Instinctively she clung to his arm for comfort, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. Then exhaustion overcame her, and she sank back again.

Sandy watched her breathing for a few minutes, with his hand on her pulse, and then he tiptoed out of the cabin to tell Pat what had happened.

And as he passed out into the night, he realized that for the first time in his life, he was in love.

Late that night the four men sat huddled over the small stove discussing their problem. Asa Bond had been buried in the grave that Ezra had dug, and stones piled over the grave to protect it as much as possible from coyotes. Alice Bond had been carried into the little back room, and was sleeping soundly.

"I'm damned if I know what to do," confessed Pat. "Which is goin' a long way for me."

"We can't be leavin' her here in the condition she's in," said Sandy quickly.

"Better than tryin' to move her," muttered Ezra.

"With the snow about to fall?" cried Sandy. "And what would she be eating? Those greasers cleaned everything out of this cabin that a rat could eat."

"We could leave her some food," said Sam dryly.

"And how much? What would happen to her if it started snowing bad?"

"There's only four horses," Pat mused. "But Sandy's right. We can't leave her here alone."

Darcy flashed a grateful look at his chief.

"The kid might stay here and take care of her," threw in Sam slyly. "I reckon we three could handle Pot Shot and his gang."

Darcy flushed. "I've got a letter for Touslin that no one except myself will be delivering," he said crisply. "And now more than ever."

"It would delay us three days, gettin' her over to Hopewell Junction from here even if she could travel," Pat said. "Must be close on to fifty miles."

"More like forty, I reckon," said Ezra.

"That'd be too long," Pat decided. "We'd never see Touslin until he got back to Santa Fé, and God help us if he ever gets into that rat hole."

There was a sudden stir behind them, and instinctively all four men leaped to their feet and wheeled, their guns in their hands.

Alice Bond stood in the low doorway leading into the back room, her tall, slight figure swathed in a blanket, her hand against the wall for support. She was startled by their sudden movement and the sight of four ready guns, but as they relaxed, she smiled a little.

"You shouldn't be up, ma'am," protested Pat.

"I'm all right." Her voice was low and musical. "I feel better. Can I come in?"

Darcy quickly offered her the one crude homemade chair the cabin boasted, and she dropped into it with a grateful look.

"You were talking about me?" she asked.

"Well, we were talkin' things over, ma'am," Pat admitted.

"If you can wait a day, I'll be able to ride, and you can take me to wherever you're going. I—I can't stay here, now." She looked around her and shuddered.

"We can't very well take you where we're goin'," said

Pat slowly.

"Why not?"

"This is a sheriff's posse, and we're trailin' the Mexicans who were here today. They'll be headin' south over the mountains and down into the Territory."

"That's where I used to live," she said quickly. "I'd rather go back there than anywhere else. I have friends on a ranch near Taos."

"It'd be too hard ridin' for any gal, ma'am," Sam threw in, "and dangerous, and besides yuh ain't fit to ride."

"I'll be all right tomorrow. I've got to leave here! I can't stay!"

"And there's no horse, anyhow," said Pat gloomily.

"Reckon you wish you had that pack horse I wanted to bring along. Now, don't you?" demanded Ezra, his eyes gleaming triumphantly.

Her eyes showing fear again, Alice turned to Darcy.

"Don't let them leave me here," she pleaded. "I can ride —by tomorrow—as far, as hard as necessary. I've ridden all my life—and I can shoot."

Sandy turned to Pat Stevens. "See here, Pat. This is all bad medicine. It isn't what we'd be wanting to do, but what we'll be having to do. Just over the mountains about fifty miles is San Luis. It's not much of a town, but it's not far out of the way Touslin will be travellin' if he's heading for Santa Fé and cuts through the mountains. If we had an extra pony, we'd be just as well off taking Miss Bond to San Luis as anywhere else, and we'd lose less time."

Pat rolled a cigarette. "Might be we would," he admitted. "And where is the pony?"

"I'll get a horse here by tomorrow afternoon," Sandy promised. "And Miss Bond shouldn't be moving until then."

"Where'll you get the horse?"

"The Bar ES!"

Stevens thought for a minute, and then shook his head.

"If it starts snowin', we'll lose their trail altogether, bein' so far behind—not to speak of never catchin' up with 'em."

"They'll be travellin' slow," urged Sandy. "You can't hurry pack mules."

Sam cleared his throat. "Pat, yuh and me or yuh and Ezra might go on ahead, and sort of keep in touch with Pot Shot for the time bein'."

"Split up?" demanded Pat sharply.

"What the kid says about the greasers travellin' slow is right. They got them mules, and they think they're safe. We could catch up with yuh, and yuh sure ought to be able to leave a trail we could follow."

Frowning, Stevens considered their problem carefully.

"All right, kid," he said finally. "Get goin', but better leave your cayuse at the ranch and come back with two fresh horses."

"Seems as how the government is makin' mighty free with the Bar ES string!" Ezra grunted.

"Hush up, you bullfrog," said Pat. "Sam, you and me'll get moving at daybreak and Ezra'll wait for Sandy and Miss Bond."

It was obvious, however, that Ezra did not relish the idea of being left with the girl. He was growling away to himself.

"How're you sure we'll even meet up?" he asked finally.

Sam looked at him contemptuously. "Ezra, if yuh kin follow the tracks of someone who *don't* want to be trailed with that one eye, yuh ought to be able to close it and follow the trail we'll lay. It'll be a mile wide."

Pat chuckled. "Come on, Sam, we'd better pack up, and roll in."

"I'm terribly grateful to you all," murmured Alice. "I'm sorry I'm so much trouble."

"Oh, that's all right, Miss," Ezra said quickly before anyone else had a chance to speak. He made a gallant bow. "We're right glad to be helpin' you."

Sam looked at him disgustedly and snorted. Then without a word he stamped out of the cabin.

"That Ezra'll be the death of me yet," he confided as Stevens caught up with them. "Say, Pat, yuh goin' to make her a deputy, too?" he grinned.

6. Massacre in the Canyon

The sun sure rolls under early up here," observed Sam the next afternoon about three o'clock.

They were high in the mountains now. Since dawn they had followed the trail of the Touslin gang, followed it steadily, doggedly. At eight o'clock they had found the spot where the Mexicans had camped for the night before—a tight little canyon threaded by a small creek. Sam had slipped off his horse, and wandered around the narrow canyon, apparently intent only on stretching his legs. He kicked around in the ashes of the campfire, and then picked up some of the ashes in his hand. He wandered over to where the outlaws had picketed their horses, and examined the horse droppings.

"Pot Shot laid up here 'bout ten or eleven hours," he decided finally.

"You're just nature fakin'," gibed Pat. "Pretending you're another hound dog like Ezra. Still, it does look as though he's been takin' things easy."

Sam nodded. "We're catchin' up on him some. Where do you reckon he's goin' to cross the range?"

"Damned if I know," confessed Pat. "There's probably passes up here, but I don't know nothing between La Vita, which is way north of here, and the Reis River Pass, which is south."

"How far south?"

"This side of Taos."

"Yuh reckon we're still in Colorado, or have we crossed the line?"

"You tell me," Pat grinned.

At the spring where Pot Shot had apparently stopped at noon, Pat and Sam did not even halt, except to fill their canteens, but pressed on after the fugitives.

The skies were clearer today, and the immediate threat of snow seemed past. But high up on that mountain tableland between two ranges, heavy, sharp fall air seemed to be suspended around the green pines like transparent, chilled vapor. It was a wooded country of small, icy mountain lakes. There were game trails everywhere, and beaver dam after beaver dam bore evidence to the fact that man had not yet made this land his own.

"Beginnin' to realize why old Bond settled down in these parts," said Sam. "What a country for a trapper."

Pat was riding ahead. He nodded, but did not answer. He was pondering over just how far ahead Pot Shot must be. Not more than six hours, possibly less. For the track bore evidence that the Mexicans were moving slowly.

Suddenly Pat halted, his eyes intent on the soft ground before him.

"What's bitin' yuh?" demanded Sam, coming up. "I kin see tracks forty yards on from heah."

"Yeah, so can I," said Pat dryly. "But what do you make of *that?*"

His pointing hand swung away from the trail to the right, and then back, and to the left away from the trail toward the dense woods a few hundred yards away. Then he dismounted.

Sam swore softly, and joined Pat on the ground.

"Watch that damn bronc of yours," cautioned Pat. "He's a bad actor."

"He's all right," said Sam shortly.

Silently both men examined the new tracks that came from the east, crossed the trail they were following, and disappeared into the west. Pat followed them along for a few feet, picked up some of the displaced earth and crum-

bled it in his fingers. Then he returned to the main trail, and wandered around.

Sam was rolling a cigarette, apparently having seen enough to satisfy him. "Well, I reckon it ain't none of our business," he said. "Might as well be gettin' on."

Pat shook his head. "I don't like it," he muttered.

"What's rubbin' yuh?"

"Well, five Indians——"

"How'd yuh know they're Injuns?" broke in Sam. "They're Injun ponies all right—small feet and they ain't shod—but lots o' white men must ride Injun ponies down around these parts."

Pat pointed to some faint footprints in the soft earth.

"First thing a white man does with an Indian pony is train him for mountin' on the left—all these hombres, every last one of 'em, after they got down to read the greasers' trail, got back on their ponies *on the right side!*"

"Missed that," confessed Sam. "Even so, what of it? Five Injuns off huntin', most likely, find a trail, look it over, and ride off."

"Probably huntin', all right," mused Pat. "But they're a long ways from home—either too far north or too far south. And when an Indian gets away from his own stomping ground, watch out for him. He's likely to make trouble. It's in his blood."

"They ain't aimin' to make trouble for the greasers, or they'd have followed along."

"Ever know five Indians to take on eight white men if they could help it? But let 'em cut east again and find our trail, and things get different. We've got horses, food and ammunition—things they could use."

"Shucks, they ain't goin' to find our track."

"Then there's that girl comin' along behind us with only Ezra and Darcy, not knowin'."

"Ezra was scalpin' Injuns before yuh was born," scoffed Sam. "Yuh ain't turnin' yellow on us, are yuh, Pat?"

"I don't like Indians around when I've got other business," muttered Pat stubbornly.

"Might ride after 'em, tell 'em yuh're nervous, and ask 'em to go away," suggested Sam.

Pat grinned.

"What *are* yuh goin' to do?" persisted Sam.

"I reckon just ride on and trust to luck." Pat walked over to where his roan was ground tied, and swung into the saddle. "Come on, we got a couple more hours before it gets too dark to follow tracks."

Sam followed. "Wait'll I tell Ezra about yuh and the Injuns. He sure will enjoy it," he chuckled.

"You may have something real good to tell him before we're finished," retorted Pat curtly. "From now on we watch back of us as well as front of us. Keep your eye peeled."

For an hour they jogged silently on. Finally Sam cleared his throat.

"Pat." His tone was grudging, almost apologetic. "Pat, I reckon we're bein' trailed."

Stevens wheeled his horse instantly.

"Huh?"

"Mebbe yuh was right about those Injuns."

"Where? What d'you see?" snapped Pat.

"Nothin'. I don't see nothin'. But I feel somethin'—like as though someone was creepin' around after me in a dark room."

Stevens studied his companion thoughtfully. "That all?" he demanded at last.

"That's enough," muttered Sam, glancing around, trying to pierce the dusk that was rapidly closing in upon them.

"Who's gettin' nervous now?"

"I don't like bein' trailed."

"You ain't seen anything?"

"Damn it, Stevens," Sam burst out. "I tell yuh I *feel* it.

An' when I *feel* something, to hell with my eyes. A tree or a rock gets in the way of my eyes, but a man can feel around corners. I've been thinking something was wrong for most fifteen minutes now. I tell yuh someone's trailin' us and he's near enough to *feel.*"

"Well, if you're right, we'd better find out for sure."

Pat studied the landscape carefully. Where they were, it was bare and rocky. Just ahead trees began again, and the valley narrowed down into what looked like a winding canyon.

"If we could get over yonder on that high ridge," Stevens said, pointing ahead, "before your friends cross this patch, we might see 'em—providin' there's anything to see."

"That'd bring 'em mighty close."

"No help for it. And even if they see us, they won't try to close in before dark if they're Indians."

Sam nodded. "I'd sure like to *know,*" he growled. "Not too fast," he warned, as Pat led off. "Don't want 'em noticin' by the tracks we're in a hurry."

Five hundred yards on, they drew up.

"See that big gray rock over there?" demanded Pat.

Sam nodded.

"Watch it. You won't be able to see anyone braking into the clearing from here, but from that rock I will. When I wave my hat, you come after me right smart. See? I'll be down on the low ground by the time you get there."

"It's gettin' pretty dark," Sam muttered.

"Yeah, we'll have to hurry. So long."

And Pat rode off.

When he reached the point he'd selected, he ground-tied his horse, and started clambering up over the loose shale toward the great rock that almost hung above him. It was hard going in his high-heeled boots, but finally he reached his objective. He took off his hat, and on his hands and knees crawled up the last few feet to a point where he

could see the big patch of open ground behind him.

There was Sam, down in the hollow, slouching in his saddle, motionless. Swiftly Pat's eyes swept the clearing. It was deserted. Then his eyes focussed on the woods at the far side where he figured he and Sam had left the forest.

Five minutes he waited. Ten. Then he became tense. For five mounted figures had ridden slowly out of the woods, following their trail. It was getting too dark for Pat to see much more than the general outlines that told him they were Indians.

He raised his hat, and waved it back and forth slowly, until he saw Sam start his horse forward. Then he scrambled and slid down the precipitous rock. When he reached his horse, Sam was waiting.

Without a word, Pat leaped into the saddle and they were on their way. Sam knew without asking what he had seen.

"Reckon yuh couldn't see enough to make out what *kind* of Injuns?" he decided.

Pat shook his head.

"What yuh goin' to do? Can't go on like this if yuh want to trail Pot Shot."

"No. They're sure lookin' for trouble—and for loot—or they wouldn't be trailin' us. And we don't want trouble. I hate to do it, Sam, but I reckon we got to make dead sure they're after *our* scalps, and if they are——" Pat's voice trailed off.

"I don't mind killin' Injuns none."

"I do," muttered Pat. "Suppose I'm gettin' old and sort of peaceful—but we're up against it if they *are* on the warpath."

"Well?"

"We'll make camp pronto, just as soon as we hit a likely spot, and let 'em close in on us when it gets dark—just as though we didn't suspect anything wrong."

"That's the hell of an idea," Sam burst out. "Injuns can

shoot nowadays, and they all got rifles probably."

"We won't be hangin' around the fire," Pat said quietly. "We got to let 'em start things, or we won't be sure what's what. Once they start, we'll finish 'em. That canyon up ahead looks good to me."

Sam grunted. "May work," he admitted.

Fifteen minutes later Pat pulled up. They had come up the canyon perhaps half a mile. It had narrowed down, but to the left was a little pocket almost like a horseshoe. The trees there were stunted and not too thick. And by the mouth of the glade, like great sentinels, lay huge rocks which dominated the spot.

Pat examined the lay of the land carefully, and then nodded with satisfaction.

"Sam, you take the horses over yonder to the far side behind those piñons as far as you can get 'em out of the way, throw 'em, and tie 'em. We don't want no horses gettin' shot. I'll start a fire. Leave the saddles and packs here."

Swiftly he chose a spot some twenty yards in from the canyon, in the center of the glade, well away from any big trees, and started a fire. Then he unrolled their blankets and packs.

By the time he was through, Sam was back.

"Get some supper cookin'," he ordered. "I got work to do."

"Seems to me yuh're bein' mighty trustful of those devils back there."

"They won't try anythin' till they think we're asleep," Pat said confidently. "And I'm hungry." He disappeared into some near-by bushes with the blankets over his arm.

Half an hour, and it was full night. They had bolted their hot jerky, flapjacks and coffee, and sat smoking by the fire. Their rifles lay beside them and they sat on opposite sides of the fire so as to watch in all directions.

Sam rose to throw more wood on the fire.

"Don't do that," Pat said quietly. "Let it die down now. We're goin' to turn in right soon."

"Ezra'd like this fine," muttered Sam. "Yuh got dummies fixed up, or what?"

"Yeah, I'll bring 'em out from the bushes soon as the fire dies down so's it isn't so light."

Silently they waited another quarter of an hour.

"Yuh don't reckon Touslin's near enough to be hearin' somethin' when things start poppin', do yuh?" demanded Sam.

"I sure hope not," Pat replied grimly. "I'd hate to disturb Pot Shot any. We just got to take a chance. . . . 'Bout time, I guess, Sam. Now listen to me careful, and do exactly what I tell you. Get up, stretch your arms around as though you were sleepy. Then got hold of your rifle and slip it up against your leg so's it can't be seen. Head for those thick bushes behind me, follow the trail I made, and you'll find two dummies made out o' brush and our blankets. Leave your rifle there. Slip back with the dummy that's supposed to be you. Lay it down near the fire, and creep off on your yellow belly. I'll be walkin' around so's they won't notice you. Get your rifle, slip around, and climb that rock behind you. Then wait. I'll be on the rock opposite. Don't you do any shootin' till I do, no matter what happens. Then let 'er roar, and flatten out anything you see. Got that all straight?"

Sam grunted, rose, and slowly, deliberately followed Pat's directions. It was five minutes before he finally crawled off after laying the dummy down by the fire. In the low flickering light of the fire, it was apparently a man rolled up in his blankets for the night. Then Pat went through much the same procedure, and wormed his way toward his rock. And complete and utter silence filled the little canyon.

Pat could plainly see the clearing with the dying fire in the center, the two cocoon-shaped forms lying close together nearby, the dark pile of saddles and packs a few feet

away, and the whole stretch of ground running from the canyon, between the rocks, and up to the camping ground. From Sam's rock fifteen yards away came no sound.

Alert and tense, he waited what seemed like an interminable time, but his reason told him that perhaps only half an hour had passed. He didn't like what he was doing. Setting a trap for human beings and then springing it wasn't the kind of fighting Pat Stevens went in for, even with Indians. But tonight it was the only way. It wasn't only a matter of his own safety. It was the safety of others, including a girl, and the success of the whole pursuit of Pot Shot Touslin. There was too much at stake to take unnecessary chances.

Suddenly the silence of the night was broken by the weird, high call of a wildcat. It came from close by in the canyon. Pat stiffened. It might be a wildcat. It might not.

His eyes raked the canyon, trying to penetrate the blackness, but there was nothing to see. The cry was not repeated. That meant something. Once a cat started, it did not stop at once, he reflected.

And then, below him, not thirty feet away, a shadow moved. Pat watched it like a hawk. The shadow was moving slowly toward the pocket-like glen. Then another shadow followed, and another. A fourth movement came from another spot to the right. That would be the watcher, Pat thought grimly. He waited for a fifth, but it did not materialize. One Indian must be watching the horses.

As he watched the four dark bodies creep with tortuous care toward the glen, he wondered if Sam could see them, too. It would be so easy to pick them off now, and they were obviously bent on mischief. But something kept him from shooting until the Indians had actually opened things up themselves.

They were inside the rocks now, and the leader waited for the others to come up to him. The four shadows merged into one, then, after a moment, two Indians crept out in a

circle, apparently heading for the other side of the fire. They obviously planned to surround the sleeping figures, and then close in from every side.

Now they were all working in. They were within ten yards of their victims. Five yards. Almost as though they were being regulated by the same puppet string, two arms rose, one over each still cocoon and seemed to hang there. As a twig lying by the embers burst into small flame, Pat could see the glitter of a knife.

Deliberately Pat raised his rifle, put the sight on the figure nearer him, and pulled the trigger. Even as his Winchester flashed and the Indian by the fire jerked with the impact of the heavy slug in his chest, Sam's rifle roared from across the way. He'd been waiting, Sam had, Pat thought grimly as his rifle swung toward a second black shadow. He shot again, and with a blood curdling shriek another body dropped, falling helplessly across the glowing embers of the fire. The echoes from Pat's first shot were still reverberating through the canyon.

In ten seconds it was over, and it was quiet once more. Then Pat heard the sound of horses galloping down the canyon. The man guarding the ponies wasn't waiting to find out what had happened. He knew.

"Cleaned up?" came a low voice from Sam's rock.

"I reckon," Pat muttered. "Let's get that poor devil off the fire quick."

Swiftly he slipped down the rock, and, his six-gun in his hand, moved cautiously toward the scene of action.

There was a sudden flash from the ground ten yards away, and Pat felt his arm burn. He swung around, and poured six shots into the shadow. There was a last choking gasp, and then silence again.

Sam loomed up beside him.

"He nicked me," Pat muttered.

"Bad?"

"No, just the arm. . . . Pull that one off the fire, or he'll

roast."

"Serve him right."

Sam dragged the dead body away from the coals, and threw some wood on. In a few moments the fire was blazing, and the whole grisly scene was illuminated: the Indian body Sam had dragged off the fire; nearby, a second naked figure, a knife still in his hand. Crumpled around a rotting pine stump, a third, and further away, where Pat's last salvo had quieted him forever, the fourth bronze body. Except for breechcloths, the Indians were stark naked. Two of them had rifles beside them. The other two, just knives.

"That's the end of *their* warpath," grunted Sam.

Pat examined their painted faces carefully.

"From down south somewhere," he muttered. "But I'm damned if I know what tribe. They might be Navajos! But what d'you suppose they're doin' way up here?"

"Search me—here, let's see yuhr arm." Sam ordered.

"That ain't nothin'," he said a few moments later. "Yuh have the damndest luck of any two-legged man I know. Say, Pat, I thought them southern Injuns were sort of peaceful and lived in pueblos and farmed."

"That's right for the Pueblos—mostly. But a piece west you get the Navajos and Apaches, and even some of the Pueblo tribes have learned bad habits from the others."

"Is that war paint?"

Pat shook his head. "Don't think so. A huntin' party, I reckon, and then they saw our tracks and thought we was too good to miss."

"Too bad one of 'em got away."

"I don't worry about him. One Indian's no more poison than no Indians. He'll just keep on ridin' till he gets home. . . . Sam, how d'you feel about sleepin' right here? Think you'd rest right good with all this around, or you want to move on a bit?"

"Injuns don't bother me, dead or alive," said Sam. "I'm not movin' again tonight."

"All right. I don't like it, but——" Pat muttered a little reluctantly. "Well, let's pull 'em out of the way."

Sam snorted. "Yuh'll be wantin' to give 'em a Christian burial next," he jeered.

7. "Yuh Better Start Prayin' for a Pair of Wings"

Sam surveyed Pat the next morning over a pan of sizzling bacon.

"Wait'll Ezra comes on to *this* massacre," he chuckled. "It sure will surprise him. Can't yuh see him figurin' out from the tracks just what happened."

"He'll never get it straight—'cause he won't know about the dummies."

"Leave that there brush where it lies, and I'll bet yuh my new chaps 'gainst yuhr bandana he'll be able to tell the whole story."

"Maybe."

"Say, Pat, ain't it queer those Injuns runnin' around these parts with so little on at this time o' year? It's mighty cold."

"Probably left their Sunday clothes with the ponies. Indians don't like this sort o' fightin' with clothes on."

"When d'yuh reckon the others'll catch up with us?"

"Tomorrow, if they keep on comin'. They can travel a lot faster than we're goin'."

"And then?"

"If we can, and things shape up right, we crack down on Pot Shot tomorrow night. . . . Hurry up with that chow, Sam, we got to be rollin'."

"What yuh goin' to do with them two extra rifles? I was lookin' 'em over this mornin', and they ain't bad. That's all those devils had worth anything, two rifles, unless yuh're needin' moccasins."

"I ain't shootin' no rifle but my own," said Pat. "When I have to pull a trigger, somehow I like to know where I'm

shootin'. You can pack 'em if you want."

"Might as well," said Sam thoughtfully as he rose from before the fire.

"You sure will look like an army, totin' three rifles," grinned Pat.

"Time's been when I'd have been right glad to have three rifles, all loaded," Sam retorted.

It wasn't long before they were out of the canyon, and back on the Mexicans' trail again. It was more difficult to follow now, for the ground was getting rockier and rockier.

"Ever thought that this hombre Pot Shot seems to know this country mighty well?" pondered Sam. "Seems as how he knows just where he's goin' all the time."

"He went up a blind canyon yesterday and had to track back."

"Only one blind canyon in *this* country is damn good if yuh ask me," Sam pointed out.

Pat nodded. "I'm worried by those clouds. Looks like snow again. If it starts to snow, Ezra's goin' to be out o' luck—and so are we."

Sam scanned the sky carefully. "No snow until tomorrow, anyhow," he decided.

About ten o'clock they came to where the Mexicans had camped the night before.

Sam looked over the tracks leading on, then circled the camping ground.

"Pot Shot's turned his mules loose," he announced. "He's travellin' now without 'em. What d'yuh make of that?"

"Sure?"

"Yeah, here's where they wandered off, and there's only eight tracks again headin' south."

"Must have decided to hurry some. No other reason to leave the mules behind. That means we got to speed up, too."

"What the hell's the use of our speedin' up, when we got

to wait for Ezra and Darcy?"

"Sam," asked Pat thoughtfully, "you don't suppose those greasers was near enough us last night to hear the shootin', do you?"

Sam shook his head. He was still wandering around the camp.

"Well, why do they get in a hurry all of a sudden, then?" Pat persisted.

"Here's somethin' else sort of queer," drawled Sam. "Sometime or other one hombre rode off by hisself, and later came back. I found the goin' track over there a minute ago, and here is the comin' track."

"Which direction did he take?"

"Cut back almost on the big trail we came in on."

"Well, we ain't got time to see what he was up to, long as he came back," decided Pat. "Better push on."

Sam swung wearily back into the saddle. "Seems as how I've been doin' a lot of ridin' lately. Must be gettin' old, too."

The trail led away toward a thickly wooded canyon that wound up between the last two mountains whose summits showed timber. Beyond were bare, bleak granite peaks of the great range, peaks that still held fast the snow and ice of the preceding winter. The timber line, above which not even the scrubby pines found footing, cut across the horizon as if a great finger had swept ruthlessly along, smearing out all active life above a certain altitude, reserving the higher world for gods who did not depend on earth or air or warmth for sustenance.

When they reached the mouth of the canyon, they found it almost choked with scrub oak, underbrush and rocks. And cutting through the gorge, roaring and boiling in its narrow, rocky bed a creek that had obviously been fed for years by the glacier above them.

"A man ain't got no business goin' up there with a hoss," Sam grumbled.

"What's good enough for a Mex is good enough for you," announced Pat. "And they'll have beat out a trail for us."

Even so, it was hard going. For three hours they broke their way through the brush, following the trail of the fugitives. Then suddenly ahead of them loomed the rocky head of the gorge, split by a great fall of water that broke into five different cascades as it smashed its way down from the heights above.

"And how do we get out o' here?" demanded Sam. "My hawss don't fly."

"Neither did the greasers'. I think I see their trail windin' up yonder."

When they reached the bottom of what seemed sheer rock, they found a narrow shelf scarcely two feet wide zig-zagging up around the precipice.

"I ain't ridin' up there on this cayuse," said Sam grimly. "I'm walkin' on my own feet, and the bronc can come along behind me if he likes."

"Told you that outlaw was bad medicine for this trip."

Pat turned his own roan on to the ledge, and pushed the reluctant animal forward. Sam dismounted and followed on foot, leading his pony.

Higher and higher the ledge led around the rock, a sheer drop on one side, crumbling shale on the other, narrowing down in spots so that there was scarcely room for a horse to find foothold, with one side of his belly and the saddle hanging out over the dizzy depth, and barely space for a leg between the rock and the saddle.

Half an hour later Sam pulled himself and his pony on to the flat rocky ledge above the canyon, and wiped the sweat from his face.

"I sure hope that gal Alice enjoys *that* climb," he groaned. "Pat, if yuh ever want to get me back to Powder Valley, yuh're goin' to have to find another route. That's *one* trail I ain't ever goin' *down* s'long as I live."

Pat surveyed the range rising up to the west. "That's

nothin' to what's likely ahead, Sam."

"God, it's gettin' cold up here."

"What you sweatin' about then?" grinned Pat.

Sam cursed. "That ain't temperature. That's my belly upside down. . . . Come on, let's leave that cliff as far behind as we can. I want to forget it."

A flat, rocky, almost barren table-land lay ahead of them for what must have been a full five miles, before the green tops of pines showed what was obviously another deep gorge-like valley at the foot of the last range of granite. But in their path, almost in the center of the plateau was a curious formation of great red rock like an island jutting up out of the sea. It was as though the sides of a canyon had been thrown up out of the earth.

As they followed the plain trail across the plateau, it led straight for the red rocks.

"What the hell's that ahead?" demanded Sam suspiciously. "I ain't never seen nothin' like *that* before."

"Likely this was a glacier, sometime back, travellin' along and taking the earth along with it, but those rocks were too tough and they got left where they were."

Pat studied the curious formation as they approached. There was a narrow fissure not more than thirty or forty feet wide, splitting the rock in half. The sheer perpendicular walls of red rock rose two hundred feet before they levelled off, and then dropped sharply down to the plain again.

And the Mexicans' trail led right for the cut that slashed through the rock.

Sam pulled his horse up and eyed it dubiously.

"We could circle around," he suggested.

"They went through. We better, too."

Pat headed for the opening of the cut, and Sam followed. Within forty feet of the entrance, the high walls began to shut off the light, and the murk of the canyon was as though it were evening instead of morning. Their

way twisted sharply after the first hundred yards, with the cliffs almost overhanging the gorge.

"I don't like this none at all," muttered Sam. "It's agin nature."

But just ahead the pass suddenly opened up into a great round pocket and to the left a black hole showed the opening to what was apparently a cave in the rock.

As Pat and Sam pulled in their horses simultaneously to look around them, an uncanny death-like silence fell over the gorge.

Then without the slightest warning the silence was shattered by the echoing roar of rifles. A rain of lead fell like hail around the two horsemen. Pat's roan gave one lunge. Then he wilted to the ground, shot straight through the brain.

"The cave!" yelled Pat as he rolled out from under his pony and plunged wildly for the protection of the yawning black hole.

Sam was only a yard behind him.

Safe for the moment in the mouth of the cave, Pat rose up from his knees. There was barely room to stand. His two guns were in his hands.

Behind him Sam groaned.

"They get you?" Pat demanded over his shoulder.

"No." Sam groaned again. "Wrenched my ankle, though, divin' in here. They sure got us where they want us now."

Pat nodded grimly. "I'm a damn fool," he admitted. "There goes *your* horse, Sam. They got him in the backbone, the way he's kickin'. I'll finish him off."

Carefully he aimed for the thrashing head, and pulled the trigger. The horse suddenly became still.

Pat Stevens began to curse, damning himself into oblivion. Bullets were still spattering regularly just outside the mouth of the cave, a sinister warning for anyone who might be thinking of making a break.

"No use feelin' bad about it," Sam said cheerfully. "Here

we are. One thing, we're sure safe enough in this cave s'long as we want to stay. Myself, I need some rest. How d'yuh suppose it all happened?"

Pat was still swearing softly. "Reckon they heard us last night, and led us right on up here where they could dry-gulch us."

"Hell, why didn't they pick us off before? It'd a' been easy."

"Probably figured it was a safer hand to play up here. There'd be a chance of our gettin' away most anywhere else."

Sam nodded. "In this here pocket, two men, one on each end, could hold an army. They must have forgot the cave though."

"Or maybe they wanted to make sure we was trailing them," Pat said thoughtfully.

"I don't see how they heard us last night so far away," Sam objected.

"Sound does funny things up in these hills. And that hombre that rode off alone for something may have come right close to us without our knowing it. . . . God, I sure hate to lose that horse of mine."

"We don't need no hawsses just now," Sam said sourly. "Yuh better start prayin' for a pair of wings and somethin' to keep us from bein' seen.—Ouch, damn that ankle. I can't even stand on it, Pat."

"Watch the mouth of the cave, and I'll look you over."

Sam's ankle had already swollen so that Pat had trouble pulling the boot off. Finally it came away in his hand. Sam's face was white with pain.

"That ain't so good," Pat announced gloomily. "That's the hell of a sprain. Ought to have hot cloths and things, and we ain't got nothin'—not even water. I'll tie it up as good as I can, and you'll have have to lie here for the time being."

"What about food?" demanded Sam. "Yuh goin' to be

able to snake any food off them hawsses?"

Pat nodded. "Have to, but I'll be waitin' till it gets dark."

"How far away do they lie?"

"The roan's only about ten yards off, but it's take time to get the packs untied. Your critter's way off. He started to bolt before they shot him."

"They're right over us on the cliff, I suppose."

Pat nodded. "Must be. Lucky they had to shoot straight down, or they'd have got us sure."

"Don't suppose there's any question about whether it's Pot Shot's gang or not."

"Hell, no. I know the way those greasers shoot. . . . Sam, there might be water back in the cave somewhere. It's sort of damp even here, and that tunnel looks as though it goes right back into the rock. Think you can cover things all right while I go and look? Water's goin' to be sort of important."

"Sure is, if we're spendin' the winter here, and it sure looks that way. There's some other truck out there on them hosses would come in mighty handy—rifles, blankets, and such like."

Pat started back into the tunnel. Before he had taken ten steps, it twisted, and all light from the opening was shut off. He did not want to waste any matches, so from that point on he groped his way forward on hands and knees. The hole did not seem to be getting any smaller as Pat progressed, in fact when ten yards further on he raised his hand he could not find the rock above him. Cautiously he rose to his feet. The air was dank and stale, but he started on again, feeling each step. Then his foot splashed into something.

Water! Swiftly he went down on his knees and smelled of it. It stank. It was stagnant, and impure from lack of air. The pool seemed to fill the cavern from there on, so, disappointed, Pat retraced his steps, and once more on hands and knees emerged into the semi-light of the cave

mouth.

"Any water?" demanded Sam anxiously.

"Yeah, but I'm not thirsty enough yet to drink it, and I don't think you are either."

"We will be," prophesied Sam. "Those boys are just droppin' one slug down about every half minute just to show us they're watchin' us. Reckon they figure on hangin' around and starvin' us out now."

"That's about all they can do."

"Pat, what d'yuh reckon'll happen when Ezra, Darcy, and that gal comes ridin' along all unsuspectin'?"

"I've been thinking of that."

"The greasers'll spot 'em over at the edge of the plateau —providin' they ever get over that rock we come up, which I doubts."

"Yeah, and they'll lay low while they're crossin' the flats, and let 'em ride right into the canyon like we did."

"This cave's goin' to be mighty crowded if that's the case," Sam grumbled.

"Now that Pot Shot knows about this cave, Ezra and the others'll never get as far as we did," reflected Pat grimly. "They'll just let 'em get far enough into the bottle so's they can put the cork in, and then let them have it."

"I reckon yuh know what I'm thinking, Pat," Sam said quietly.

Pat Stevens nodded. "They'll have a guard, though, at each end of the canyon after dark, and fires if they got any sense. And I kind of hate the idea of leavin' you here alone in the condition you are, even if I can get you enough food and water for a couple of days."

"Hell, I'm all right. I don't need to do no movin' around to keep rattlesnakes out of this hole. One hand and a six-gun's all I want."

"Then there's somethin' else.—What if I do slip by the guard and get back to Ezra and Darcy. After ridin' across that rifle range all in the open, what chance have three

men got of disturbin' eight greasers sittin' up on top of these rocks, snug as a lot of bugs in a rug. I ain't afraid of shootin' it out with anybody, but that just don't make sense."

"It don't seem to," admitted Sam. "Damn this foot o' mine. That's the burr under *this* saddle. . . . Means night work, I reckon."

"Yeah. That's the only chance."

Sam ducked as a ricocheting bullet whizzed past his ear. In sheer defiance he ground three shots out through the mouth of the cave.

"Stop wastin' lead," Pat commanded sharply. "You may need it all."

"I'd sure like to have a rifle, and see if I could do a little snipin' from under the ledge there," Sam observed wistfully. "Couldn't do nothin' with a hogleg, though, from here. Take a look-see, anyhow, Pat."

Pat moved cautiously to the opening of the cave, and edged out as far as he could without exposing himself to the view of the snipers up on the rocks. All he could see was the sheer red precipice on the other side of the gorge, and one little spot of gray sky where the top of the rock dipped. He picked up a stick, stuck his hat on it, and shoved it out experimentally. Bullets promptly poured down on it.

"Reckon we'd better lie low in here where the rain can't hit us," chuckled Sam. "What'd yuh pay for that lid, Stevens?"

Pat eyed the four small round holes, two through the crown, two through the brim. It had been his favorite hat.

"I recollect how I laughed at Buck Grimes th' other day when he said these greasers could shoot," he said ruefully.

"Yuh know, Pat, I been thinkin' of another hitch. Yuh'd have to get by the guard without his knowin' it. Yuh couldn't knock him over the head or nothin'. They'd know what was up soon as they went to relieve him, and they'd

catch yuh in no time, bein' yuh've got nothin' to fawk."

"Unless I could slip one of their horses away."

Sam shook his head. "Yuh're not going to be able to do that so easy the second time."

"Have to take a chance on some things when you're in a hole."

"And we sure are in a hole—and snowed up at that!"

"This is the sort of game you've got to play one card at a time and see what happens after each trick," Pat reflected slowly. "I've sure got to start something soon as it gets dark. And since I may be kept sort of busy from then on for a time, I reckon I'd better do a little sleepin' now—if you'll be so kind, Sam, as to receive visitors at the front door."

"Why the devil didn't Sally put her foot down and keep yuh from chasin' off like a loco steer after greasers?" Sam fumed. "Then we'd all be at home with our feet on the stove, smokin'."

"We been in tighter spots than this, Sam."

"Yeah, but one of these days, Pat Stevens, yore fool luck is goin' to break."

Pat grinned. "It's still holdin', Sam. I'll pay you fifty cents on the dollar right now for your share of the reward money."

"No yuh won't," retorted Sam. " 'Cause, knowin' yuh as I do, if we don't collect that reward money we won't be havin' no use for any fifty cent pieces. Pennies'll keep a dead man's eyes down."

Pat yawned. "Well, I'll see you later," he muttered as he curled up in a dark corner of the cave.

When Pat Stevens woke, it was pitch dark. At first he'd forgotten where he was. Then he saw the glow of Sam's cigarette ten feet away, heard the report of a rifle, its echo in the canyon, and remembered.

"Sam, everything all right?" he demanded.

"Wouldn't say *that,*" Sam replied judiciously. "But every-

thing's just the way it was when yuh started snorin.' "

"Still shootin' down at us?"

Sam chuckled. "That Pot Shot's a damn clever hombre. Know what he's gone and done?"

"Built fires, I suppose."

"Sure. He's got fires at both ends of this here pocket in the canyon where it gets narrow, so's a louse couldn't crawl by without bein' stepped on. But that ain't all. 'Fore it got dark he must have fixed two rifles solid up on the rock somehow, with a cross fire aimin' at this cave hole. So now he can pour lead down any time he wants, just as though he had a solid cannon up there.—Nick—nick—nick—nick. Those little bullets keep sailin' down, and all hittin' in front of the hole. Reckon he figures we must think he can see in the dark."

Pat stretched his stiff limbs as well as he could in the narrow, low hole.

"I'll be gettin' in some food," he said.

"Pat, yuh don't have to get no food for me," Sam said slowly. "I've been four and five days without eatin' and come through. Yuh got enough to worry about tonight without tryin' to unpack them hawsses."

"I gotta eat myself," said Pat. "God knows when I'll hitch up with Ezra and Darcy."

He unbuckled his guns and rifle cartridge belt. He removed his heavy sheepskin chaps, and slipped out of his boots.

Sam watched him. "Been learnin' things from the Injuns, I see," he grinned.

"Your knife sharper than mine? I want to work fast, and I ain't waitin' to untie no knots."

Sam felt the edge of his long hunting knife reverently.

"There ain't a sharper knife than that west of the Mississippi," he decided. "But don't yuh lose it."

"How's your ankle?"

"Feels a mite better, but it ain't no good to a man yet."

"I'll try skinnin' my horse first," said Pat. He peered out into the black night. "He's right over yonder, I reckon."

"Wait until the greasers shoot again," Sam advised. "They don't seem to shoot twice together."

At the mouth of the cave, Pat waited, ready to slip out as soon as the next bullet hit.

It came, spattering hot against the rock.

Pat was moving as the report of the rifle above reached the bottom of the canyon. By the time the echo had died out, he was feeling for the ropes that held his pack to the saddle of the dead roan. He slashed every rope his fingers found. The blanket roll came free. Now for the big canteen under the cantle. That was hard, because the roan's weight was on it, but he wormed it out, and paused to shake it. Good, it was still full. Next, his rifle. And the big pouch saddle bags.

He gathered up everything, staggering a little under the unbalanced load, and started back for the cave. A hundred and fifty yards on each side of him blazed the fires that would bar his escape. They cast bright light across the full width of the narrow canyon. But it did not reach the ground he had to cover now.

Suddenly there was a flash of light from above. Pat flattened out on the ground, the load he was carrying falling around him. From where he lay, he could see a blazing ball of fire falling swiftly toward him. It was coming straight for him. He lay there for what seemed eternity waiting for it to land. It hit the rocky ground ten feet away, blazing bright, throwing out a great circle of light.

Pat lay there as though dead on the chance that from above he looked like a log or a rock, but expecting every instant a shower of lead. For a few moments nothing happened. Pat could hear the pitch pine sizzling in the light bomb a few feet away, and knew it would burn for a time. He wondered whether some noise he'd made had betrayed him, or whether they'd flung down their torch at this instant

just by chance.

Then a bullet hit the rock beside his head and stinging hot lead sprayed into his left hand. Another slug found the canteen just under his arm, and he heard the water gurgling out. He leaped to his feet, and charged for the cave, the fire from above pouring down on him. But the Stevens luck still held, and he stumbled safely into shelter.

"Well," Sam tried to drawl, but his voice was shaking, "I suppose yuh'll want to go back for the hawss now. Yuh got everythin' else in.—'S matter, couldn't yuh see good enough out there without light?"

"Get some light goin' in *here,*" Pat roared. "Hang up this canteen so's all the water won't run out, and then dig the lead out of my hand."

Sam, forgetting his ankle, tried to leap to his feet, but sank back with a moan as his leg gave way under him. Then he crawled over to where Pat crouched. He lit a match, shielding it carefully with his hands.

"Let's see—— My God, what'd they do that with, a shot gun?"

"Bullet sprayed off a rock—here, let me hold the matches. There's nothin' in here to build a fire with. Here's your damn knife. Start digging, or I'll never be able to use that hand again."

Pat got a firm seat on the ground and held his left hand out. It was steady, but his teeth were clenched, and his face went white as Sam started to work by the light of one match after another, that Pat held in his right hand.

Pat counted the matches. It gave his mind something to do. When he'd counted fifteen, Sam dropped his knife and grunted.

"That's all, Pat. That liquor in your saddle bag? Want to put some on? Better than nothin'."

"No, get out the salt, and rub it in hard. Then tie it up with my handkerchief."

Sam shrugged. "It's yore hand," was all he said.

"Gimme a drink of that whiskey," Pat said. "You figure they're goin' to keep throwin' those things down all night and keep this place lit up like a saloon?"

"Prob'ly. What was it anyhow?"

"Bunch of sticks all messed up with pitch pine, as far as I could see."

"Wait and see," advised Sam, peering out of the cave. "That one'll burn out in a few minutes.—It looks right pretty."

"Yeah, I thought so, too," Pat snapped. "If you want anything off your horse, you can go and get it yourself."

"No, I reckon what yuh brought in will keep me some time. But how in hell are yuh goin' to get out of this canyon? Yuh'll be walkin' right into it, Pat. No more chance of yuhr gettin' near them fires than tunnelling out through th'other side of this heah rock."

"Are you bettin' on that?" demanded Pat.

" 'Nother one of yore safe bets," Sam sighed disgustedly. "Who'd pay me if I won?"

"If you won, God help you," muttered Pat. "That flare'll be gone in a minute. There's hardly any light left now—damn it, there comes another!"

Like a huge blazing comet, it swirled through the air and landed a dozen yards away from the cave, and again the gorge was brightly illuminated.

Pat started buckling on his guns.

"Tie them boots down on my back," he ordered. "So they won't flap."

"Pat, yuh ain't goin' to try it this a'way?" Sam asked in a low voice.

"I'm startin' as soon as that fire ball burns down, and I'll be out o' range of the light before the next one lands. It's no good to 'em while it's on its way down, because they can't see past it. . . . Fix those boots, like I told you."

Silently Sam followed Pat's instructions.

"I ought to connect up with the others some time tomor-

row," Pat said thoughtfully. "We may show up here tomorrow night. Maybe not until the night after. In the meanwhile, it's right good of you to keep Pot Shot here waitin' for us."

"How yuh goin' to get back?"

"Couldn't say yet," admitted Pat. "But we'll show up. Just keep your shirt on."

"Takin' yore rifle?"

"Yeah, I may need that. . . . Those knots on the boots fixed so's I can untie 'em in a hurry?"

Sam grunted assent. "Can yuh use that hand?"

"I'll have to. . . . All right—now just as soon as that Fourth of July celebration calms down——"

He crouched down at the mouth of the cave, peering out, his hat pulled low over his eyes, his bandaged left hand on his knee, his right hand holding his Winchester.

"Goin' for the guard, or to slip by him?"

Pat shrugged. "Don't even know where he is. Somewhere in the shadows back of the fire. I'll have to see."

The ball of pitch fire began to flicker. Pat turned to Sam, grinned, waved his wounded hand, and slipped noiselessly away into the shadows.

Ten seconds later the third ball of fire came hurtling down, but Pat was already thirty yards away, hugging the canyon wall.

Instinctively he froze to the rock for a moment, and then crept slowly forward. Ahead of him the big watch fire blazed brightly, but there was no sign of the lurking guard. Pat crept nearer and nearer, until he dared go no further. He would have to wait now for his only chance. If the guard came out of hiding to throw more wood on the fire——

Pat crouched there waiting, his rifle ready. Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. Then he lost track of time. He had been studying as much of the ground as he could make out between him and the fire. It was flat and bare. Except for half a dozen big boulders far apart, there was no cover for

a man. The nearest thing to him was Sam's dead horse, lying where it had fallen in its stampede down the canyon. Two rifles stuck grotesquely up into the air from their saddle holsters. It lay only about ten yards away. Maybe he could make the horse without being spotted. He'd be so much nearer his goal.

On his stomach, dragging his rifle, pushing himself forward with his feet and his knees, Pat worked toward the big black heap.

Then just as he reached it, a black shadow moved on the other side of the fire. Slowly Pat slid his rifle up until it was resting on the horse's belly. But something kept him from firing. Tense, he watched that gliding shadow.

It approached the fire, but to Pat's surprise did not throw on any more wood. Now it was circling the fire until it became a silhouette between Pat and the fire itself. It edged off to the side, and then dropping down to the ground, on hands and knees, started crawling straight toward Pat. It was as if two men had arranged to meet behind the dead horse at a certain hour.

Slowly Pat pulled his rifle in. He wouldn't want that now. He had no idea of what was happening, but——

Then suddenly he realized. Unable to resist the temptation of loot, the Mexican was stealing over to see what he could filch from the gringo's pack. That was like a Mexican. Pat grinned with delight, as he painfully stretched the stiffening fingers of his left hand. He loosened Sam's knife in its scabbard.

Off came his hat, pushed under the horse's leg. Up close to his belly Pat lay, almost on his back, his body indistinguishable from the horse's body. His head was down. He didn't need to see now. He could hear the Mexican's cautious progress, nearer and nearer. In just a moment now——

A big black hat loomed up from the other side of the horse, and a blur of a face. Then a pair of shoulders.

Swiftly, silently, without one false motion, Pat's two hands shot up, seized the throat just above him, his fingers choked the man's startled cry into a throaty gurgle, and he hung on for life.

The Mexican's body whipped over on top of him like a writhing snake of steel. Pat caught both legs in a scissor—and hung on to the throat. Fists were thrashing at his face and head, but Pat did not care. A few seconds more—— He hung on. Something in his neck seemed to snap as a swinging blow caught him on the jaw under the ear. Desperately he tightened on that throat. One leg worked free, and the body turned under him. He felt a thumb groping for his eye, and he buried his face in the Mexican's chest. Then the hand began feeling for a knife, but the man's belt must be twisted, because it searched in vain. Pat tightened on the throat, and the strength began to ebb out of his victim. As he felt the Mexican weaken, Pat felt fresh strength flowing into his own veins. In a minute now it would be over——

And it was. What a few moments before had been a savage fighting animal was now a flaccid, helpless body, as dead as the horse that lay beside it.

Pat rested there a few minutes, his heart pounding, his lungs heaving, his strength completely gone, now that it was over. He wondered if there might be a second guard by the fire, and strangely did not seem to care.

Slowly his mind started working again, and then a thought struck him that rolled him over to examine the dead Mexican beside him.

A little shorter than Pat, but not much. And about the same build. Swiftly Pat began to strip the body—vest, shirt, wide trousers, and he swept up the great black hat from where it had fallen a yard away. Then he tore off his own clothes, and pulled on the Mexican's.—If he had a *serape,* Pat thought, it would be back by the fire. Rolling his own clothes up, he shoved them under the horse, buckled on his

guns again, slipped on his own boots, and started crawling toward the fire, one of Pot Shot Touslin's gang.

Once on the other side of the fire he stood up boldly, but watched keenly for any possible companion to his watch. He seemed to be alone.

That was the first trick. Now he had to begin thinking about the second.

There was no sign of a horse in the canyon. That meant that the guard coming in to relieve him would ride a pony down from the camp and expect him to ride it back. In the meanwhile the canyon ahead of him was clear. He could slip away now. But how soon would the next guard be coming in? And if he was due soon, there would be immediate discovery that something was wrong, and they'd be after him—they on horseback, he on foot. He would be tracked at daylight if he wasn't found before.

On the other hand, to wait for the new guard would be to risk a noisy fight, or discovery. If he got away with it, he'd have a horse and hours headstart of any pursuit. It was a desperate chance, but the safest course to take if he could cover the first step.

As he slipped into the shadow of a big boulder, his feet tangled in something soft. It was the missing *serape*, the blanket without which no Mexican will travel, which only the Mexican and the Indian can really wear gracefully. Pat picked it up, and pulled it over his shoulders. It hid his guns, and, pulled up, cloaked his face.

That decided him. In the Mexican's vest pocket he found a small bag of rank tobacco and a slip of corn husk cigarette papers and sulphur matches. Behind his rock, he rolled a cigarette, cautiously lit it, and settled down to wait.

The sound he was waiting for came sooner than he thought it would. Scarcely a quarter of an hour had passed before he heard the clatter of a horse's hooves trotting up the canyon.

Pat adjusted the *serape* so that he could drop it instantly

if he had to, loosened his guns, and waited concealed there behind the rock until a figure on horseback appeared around a bend of the canyon.

The Mexican rode briskly up to within twenty feet of the fire, flung off his horse, dropped the reins, and approached the fire to warm his hands. As though surprised not to find his friend waiting, he turned and looked around him.

"Manuel!" he called.

It was not until then that Pat had one of the flashes of inspiration that had carried him through so many hazards.

Quietly dropping down to the ground behind his rock, he pulled the big hat almost over his face, and softly began to snore.

"Manuel!" The voice had become more urgent, and Pat's snores became louder.

For a moment there was silence. Then Pat heard swift steps coming his way. Around the rock they came, and the Mexican halted just over him.

"Manuel! *Despiertate, tonto.*" A not too gentle kick went with the words.

Pat stirred a little, and groaned. Then the snores began again.

The guard leaned over Pat, took him by the shoulders, and shook him.

Pat raised up drowsily, lifted both arms in a sleepy stretch. A lean, swarthy face with two angry, glittering eyes hung over him. As the anger faded into a look of blank amazement, Pat's steel fingers fastened on to the second throat they'd found within half an hour, and his left hand drove Sam's knife deep between the greaser's ribs.

Five minutes later he was jogging off down the canyon, following the back trail. He had never choked a man to death before, he reflected soberly, and he hoped never to again. But tonight it had been necessary. With a shiver, he pulled the *serape* more closely around him. He longed

for his sheepskin coat, but it was in the cave with Sam.

Then he remembered the narrow ledge of rock ahead that he'd have to work down with a strange horse in the dark, and he realized that his night was just beginning.

When he finally picked up the top of the twisting pass out of the night, and looked down, he saw nothing but a black void. With a shrug, he gently spurred the hesitating pony on the narrow ledge and closed his eyes.

8. "Just Pot Shot and Me"

Following a trail—even a back trail—on a black night is a tricky business for a man even over country that he knows well. Pat's journey back that night was a succession of spurts. He'd find himself headed down a ravine or canyon that he knew they hadn't broken out of on the way up, and keep his horse in a jog trot wherever possible, letting him pick his way, but keeping him moving steadily. A few minutes later the canyon would open out and he'd come to a spot where he'd have to dismount, study the ground, waste precious matches to see in which direction the tracks lay. Then on again, perhaps over a flat stretch of table-land that he would have to cover on foot, leading his horse, checking his direction every few yards.

In all, however, he did not make bad time, and at dawn he was miles from that snake-like drop down the cliff that his undersized but sure-footed little pony had taken so casually.

He had come away without any food so there was no temptation to stop to eat. Pressing on, at nine o'clock he found himself suddenly confronted by the two great gray sentinel rocks behind which he and Sam had trapped the Indians the night before last.

"Put 'em up!" came a sharp command from behind a low granite boulder.

Pat caught the voice even as he heard it. Wiping the grin

off his face he raised his two hands slowly above his head.

Ezra stepped out from behind the rock ten yards away, his long blue-barrelled Colt in his hand.

"Where you goin' so fast, Mex?" he demanded truculently.

Pat shrugged, "*No entiendo,*" he muttered, keeping his head down so that Ezra couldn't see his face under the broad black hat brim.

"Sandy," Ezra shouted. "Sandy. Come here."

The two men waited, Ezra for Sandy, Pat for Ezra's next move.

In a moment Sandy appeared from between the two sentinel rocks.

"Here's a greaser! Heard him comin' down the canyon. What the hell's he doin' up here? Suppose he's one of the Touslin gang?"

"Don't he talk?"

"Spanish. He don't understand American."

Another figure appeared behind Sandy. Pat looked at the strange man in bewilderment, and then almost lost control of himself as he realized it was Alice Bond. An old sombrero was pulled down over her hair so that it didn't show, she wore a blue flannel shirt under her leather jacket, and Sandy's black sheepskin chaps! Yes, he shot a glance at Darcy's trousered legs for confirmation—*Sandy's own black sheepskin chaps!* A cartridge belt sagged around her waist, supporting a full grown hogleg. If he hadn't recognized the large generous red mouth and the wide eyes under the sombrero, he'd have thought his posse had taken on a slim, lithe boy to help them out.

"You sure seem to have lost your pants, Sandy," he drawled.

Ezra's mouth opened, his gun dropped, and Sandy shouted, "Pat! Pat!"

"You damn fool," spluttered Ezra. "I 'most shot you on sight. What in hell are you doin' in that outfit, and where's

Sam?"

Pat flung himself off his pony, and turned to Alice with a grin. "Ma'am, you reckon you could find me somethin' to eat fast right here while I do some talkin'? We're sort of in a hurry."

Alice nodded and with a flashing smile, turned quickly back to the pocket behind the rocks where the horses were picketed.

Ezra was beginning to recover. "What you wastin' your time messin' around with Injuns for?" he demanded. "Ain't we got enough on our hands without *that* sort o' thing?" He gestured expressively to what lay behind the rocks.

"We was afraid they'd be a trouble to *you*, Ezra, when you came along," said Pat softly.

"And where is Sam?" queried Sandy.

Swiftly Pat outlined the happenings of the preceding two days.

"So Sam's up there sittin' in a hole, holdin' on to his ankle with one hand, and wavin' a six-gun with the other," he concluded.

"And six greasers left," reflected Ezra morosely.

"Six is better'n eight," said Darcy. "If we'd just stayed out o' Pat's way for two days more, he'd have taken care of the lot."

"And what are you goin' to do about Sam?" demanded Ezra belligerently. "Sounds to me as though he's goin' to be just as hard to get at for us as for Pot Shot."

Pat nodded. "Like I told him, this here game was goin' to be played one card at a time, and it's workin' out that way. Next thing for us to do is get goin'." He grinned at Ezra. "One-eye, wait'll you see the cliff you're goin' up! Lucky for you, your wall eye's on the outside.—How's the girl workin' out?"

"She's as good as a man," said Sandy quickly. "She can ride along with me any time she wants, no matter where I'm goin'."

"Ain't your legs sort of cold?" Pat asked innocently.

Darcy flushed. "No," he muttered.

"Well, what are we goin' to do with her now?" Pat asked seriously. "We thought those greasers would be takin' some pass near San Luis. We're south of there already. We can't let a girl get mixed up in what we'll be in for the next couple of days, and——"

"Why not?" came Alice's cool voice from behind him. "Why can't you just pretend that I'm a man?"

"That'd be sort of difficult, ma'am," Pat said, his eyes twinkling.

"I can ride. I can shoot. And I sort of look like a man now. . . . Here's some meat, and some cold coffee Sandy had in his canteen."

"Thanks," Pat turned on Sandy. "Irish, I reckon this is almost as much your business as anyone's," he said slowly. "What are we goin' to do? You don't want her mixed up in what's ahead with Touslin, do you?"

Sandy looked worried. "I reckon we should have taken her to Hopewell Junction instead of bringin' her along," he confessed.

"Once you get over these mountains and down toward Taos, I know the country pretty well," Alice pointed out.

"Just now, Pot Shot's on *this* side of the range, ma'am," said Pat grimly. "Whether he ever crosses it is still to be seen."

Darcy looked up at the gray, leaden sky, and shook his head. "There's nothin' else to do but go on. We'll tuck her away somewhere safe when we get near Touslin."

"You lookin' for snow?" demanded Ezra sourly. "'Cause here it is." He held out his big calloused palm. There was a spot of moisture where a snowflake had melted.

Pat's gaze swept the landscape swiftly, and then peered up into the sky. He swept off his hat, and looked at the broad brim. Two crystallized flakes lay there, harmless looking, white, but to the three men a sinister threat of

what was to come.

"It's on its way," he said quietly. "We got to move fast. With much snow on that pass I was speakin' of, we'd never get up to the plateau. Get your horses, and let's go."

"If Sam's still livin', we'll be one hoss short again," croaked Ezra.

"No, we won't," Pat snapped. "Listen, Ez. What with the greasers, Sam, and me goin' back and forth, the trail from here on's easy. You could follow it at a dead run. Get goin' now—fast. About eight miles up, you'll find where Pot Shot camped, and turned the mules loose. By the time *we* hit that spot, you be back there with one of them mules. They won't have strayed far, probably."

"Me track a mule around these mountains?" protested Ezra. "You know what a mule's like. And bring him back? Hell, no."

"Hell, yes. And don't keep us waitin'.—Get goin'."

Ezra rode off cursing under his breath, but when Alice, Darcy and Pat reached the Mexicans' old camp they saw Ezra lounging there with one of old Bond's mules.

It had started to snow in earnest now, and the hills were gradually turning white.

"Got him, did you?" said Pat as they rode up.

Ezra turned his baleful red eye on Pat. "Yes, Sheriff," he drawled. "I got him. And he won't drive. You got to lead him.—And it's lucky you know where we're goin' from here on, 'cause with this snow there ain't going to be no more followin' of old trails."

"Pat," said Sandy pointedly, "who's goin' to *lead* that mule?"

"Seems as though Ezra *ought* to be allowed to," Alice said, hiding a smile. "He found him."

"Sure. That's right." Pat chuckled. "He's your mule from now on, Ez. And you can get him up over that rock, too."

When a little later Ezra saw that precipice, he shook his red head. The ledge of rock itself was now a zigzag line of

white against gray granite, and as Pat surveyed it, he would have sworn himself that the rock was impregnable. And with the snow, he wasn't sure but that it was.

"Pat," declared Ezra slowly but firmly, "I've followed you through the desert till my tongue withered up in my mouth, and I've stood by you when guns were poppin' and it seemed as how we didn't have a chance, an' my old body is heavy with lead I'd never be totin' if it hadn't been for your nonsense, I've starved for you and gone thirsty, but I'm damned if I try *that* trail up ahead."

Pat studied the older man. His face was working, and his one eye terrified. He meant what he said.

"Ten men've gone over that rock in the last twenty-four hours, Ezra. And one has come down," he said quietly.

"There wasn't no snow. You could see what was under your feet."

Alice Bond was studying the rock intently. Pat saw her left hand trembling a little. Abruptly, she turned to him.

"Mr. Stevens, you came down that trail last night in the dark?"

Pat nodded.

"And Sam's up on top?" she asked in a deliberate tone.

"That's right."

Without a word she turned her pony toward where the narrow ledge began, and started climbing.

Pat looked at her in amazement, and then admiration crept into his eyes.

"Hey, ma'am," he shouted, "come back here. You can't go first. I know that trail. Let me lead."

"You didn't know it the first time you went up," she called back coolly. "Reckon I'll learn it myself."

Darcy's face was white. "My God, Pat, what if——"

"Son," Pat said quietly, "when there's that much nerve around, you don't have to ask 'what if.' Folks like that get through—always."

Ezra was staring after her as though he were watching

a ghost. Then his jaw set, his shoulders went back, and he hitched up his gun belt.

"Come on, give me that mule," Pat said, riding up to him, "I know the trail."

Ezra turned his blazing eye on him. "Take your God damned hand off that mule," he rasped. "If I'm goin' off that cliff, I'll take him down with me—all the way to hell."

And he started off after Alice.

Darcy immediately pushed his horse forward, but Pat motioned him to wait.

"If anyone slips, you don't want to be too close," he warned. "There's nothin' you could do, and—well, there ain't much room up there in spots."

They made it. When Pat reached the top, they were there, in a group waiting for him. Darcy's eyes were glittering with excitement. Alice was talking and laughing with a shamefaced Ezra, putting him at his ease, making him forget that it was she who had, figuratively, pulled him up over the cliff.

Pat peered across the table-land, but through the heavy snow there was no trace of the red rock canyon.

His face lit up with satisfaction.

"Now that we're over the rock, this snow's the best break we've had."

"How come?" asked Ezra.

"How far can you see in this snow?"

"Hundred yards or so."

"Well, Pot Shot's got two eyes, but he can't see no further'n that. I figured we'd have to wait for night, but not now."

"What's your plan?" asked Darcy.

"There's likely two guards in the canyon and four greasers up on top of the rocks," said Pat thoughtfully, "on the opposite side to Sam's cave. We could block one end of the canyon, and the rest of us crack down on those up on top." He turned to Alice. "You, ma'am, I reckon we got to take

you at your word, now, and sort of think of you as a man. After that trick you pulled comin' up over the rock—well, can you shoot *right* good?"

"I'm all right," Alice said quietly.

"Ever shoot at a man? Think you'd mind much? Some folks are right good huntin' or such like, but when it comes to pullin' down on a man, they get sort of nervous."

"Those aren't men! They're animals! They're worse than animals. You haven't forgotten what happened three days ago, have you, Mr. Stevens?"

Pat looked at her keenly. "No-o-o. I reckon you'll be all right. My wife, Sally, once shot a man when she had to. —But I wish you'd call me Pat, ma'am. I ain't very used to my last name."

"I thought we were goin' to keep Alice out of any trouble," broke in Darcy.

"Kid, if I know women," Pat drawled, "neither you nor me is man enough to keep that girl out o' trouble if there's any around to get into. We'll just save time by lettin' her draw cards along with us."

"I don't like women mixin' in," muttered Sandy. "It's not right."

"You brought her along, Sandy," Pat reminded him.

Sandy flushed.

Pat went on. "I sort o' thought we'd settle her down behind some nice big boulders at this end of the canyon where she can take a hand without gettin' in trouble herself. It'll be right comfortable behind those boulders. You and Ezra and me'll slip around to the side and get up on the rocks from behind."

"How d'you know the greasers are still there hangin' around waitin' for us?" demanded Ezra.

"I don't, but the sooner we get goin', the sooner we'll find out. Now remember, you Sandy and Ez, don't shoot to kill unless you have to. I want to take *some* of that gang back to Dutch Springs to be hanged, and you

can't hang dead men. If we can slip up on 'em close enough without bein' seen, we might be able to put 'em all in a bag."

Ezra snorted derisively.

Pat swung his horse around to the west, and headed out in the direction that his instinct told him would lead to the red rock canyon. In single file, they followed him: first Ezra, then Alice, and last, Darcy.

The thick snow was falling slowly, steadily. On the bare table-land, the only breaks in the white blanket were where an occasional scrub oak had forced itself up from the rocky soil or where an overhanging rock still protected a small patch of ground.

For a full half hour the silent procession bore across the plateau. Pat was just beginning to wonder whether he was heading in the wrong direction, when he caught a glimpse of red above him to the left. Silently he turned in his saddle and pointed it out to his companions. He unsheathed his rifle, and they, watching him, followed his example. Then, still at a walk, he swung back and to the left and made for a point where the mouth of the canyon ought to be.

In a few minutes he found the spot he was looking for, and dismounted.

"We'll stake the horses here," he announced. "Right over there ahead is where Alice is goin' to pitch her tent, and we'll trek in on foot from here."

Behind some big rocks, they staked their ponies, and Pat led Alice forward to the very mouth of the canyon.

"You stay behind here," he commanded. "Lie low, keep still. Don't do nothin', unless some hombre tries to get out of the canyon. One guard, maybe two'll ride down on you when things start poppin' up at the camp. They won't be lookin' for anyone here. What I told the others about not shootin' to kill doesn't go for you. You pull your man down. I don't want you to be gettin' in any duel down here by yourself."

"Shall I come up to where you are—afterward?" Alice asked.

"No! You stay right here till everything's all over. We'll come and get you. You'll have done your part if you keep anyone from sailin' out of here and flankin' us. Only thing you got to be careful of is not to shoot Sam if he starts crawlin' out of his hole," he added with a grin.

Back again with Ezra and Sandy, he discarded his *serape*.

"Come on, bushwhackers," he growled. "Let's round 'em up. We'll stick together till we see how we can get up on top, and then spread out, you to the left, Sandy, and Ezra to the right. Go straight up. If you don't run onto anything until you hit the canyon rim, drop back a ways and work toward me until you do. We'll close in on 'em in a circle. Remember they can't jump that canyon—and wait for me to start things if you can."

Pat started out around the base of the hill and bellied out into the plain until he reached a point that he estimated was about opposite the cave in the canyon.

It was going to be an easy climb, he realized, for the rocks that sheered down so precipitously for the canyon inside dropped away gradually to the surrounding plain. It was probable that Pot Shot even had his horses up on the bluff.

He motioned Sandy to swing up the hill to the left, and Ezra to the right, and then started up himself in a straight line.

Ten minutes' climb brought him to the top of the bluff. He immediately realized that it was wider than he would have guessed. Very cautiously now he worked forward, every sense alert for some sound or movement. But the snow was like a blanket dropped down between him and the rest of the world. He moved slowly, so as to give his companions time to work up along their longer routes.

Then suddenly out of the white void ahead of him loomed a big black shape—a pony, his head down, facing away from the driving storm.

At this first tangible evidence that the Mexicans were still here, Pat's heart leaped. For in spite of all his assurance, he had been half convinced that after his break of the night before they would have fled.

He dropped down to his knees and worked forward. The pony was hobbled, he could see now, and then he spied three more horses huddled together just beyond. There would probably be two more in the canyon with the guards. That made six.

Pat frowned, and recounted carefully. There was one horse missing. Well, there might be a dozen explanations of that.

Crouching, he started to circle around the horses so as not to startle them. Fifteen yards more and he flattened out in the snow, for he could see more dark forms beyond and the sparkle of a fire. One of the men was moving. The others were still.

Foot by foot he wormed his way forward in the snow until he could see the whole scene clearly. A small spluttering campfire: two men crouching over it, a third a few feet away at the canyon rim, with a rifle across his knees, a pile of saddles covered by a blanket. Pot Shot was not in the group. He must be in the canyon below with the guards.

Pat put his hat down in front of him, and with his left hand scraped up snow from the side, and built it up over the big hat until he was completely shielded from the view of the men by the fire. Then he waited, to give Sandy and Ezra plenty of time to find their positions.

He counted three hundred, slowly, his eyes fixed on the group by the fire not twenty yards away. Then he pulled out his other Colt and pushed the two barrels over his white barricade.

"*Manos arriba. Termino la jugada,*" he called softly. "One move out of you, and you're finished."

The three Mexicans were galvanized into action. One shot his hands up above his head. The second turned toward Pat

and sat there gaping, his mouth wide open, his arms hanging lax at his side. The third greaser with the rifle started to raise it. As it came up, Pat cracked down on him, and he dropped the gun, his wrist shattered by the forty-four slug.

"Get those hands up—all of 'em, fast," Pat ground out.

The man whose hands were already up spoke rapidly in Spanish. Apparently he understood English. The second Mexican raised his hands reluctantly. The wounded outlaw was holding his injured wrist, and cursing vilely.

"You, in the black shirt, you sabe English?" Pat demanded.

The first Mexican nodded surlily.

"Good. Tell your two side kicks that there's a posse of seven men all around 'em, and not to do anything crazy."

Pat waited, but the man did not speak.

"Damn you," Pat snarled. "Didn't you hear me?" He put a bullet through the crown of the man's hat to point up his question.

The man rapidly translated Pat's message.

"Sandy!"

A cheerful voice answered from the left.

"Go on in and take the cannons and knives away from 'em.—Ezra, you there all right?"

The big man's growl came from the other side.

"O.K. Tom, Dick, and Harry, you stay where you are, too."

Swiftly Darcy stripped the Mexicans of all their side arms, unloaded them, and flung them in a heap by the fire. Then he picked up their rifles, and they followed the revolvers.

"Ezra, step over to the canyon and see if you can see anything down there."

Ezra pulled himself up from behind a rock, and ploughed through the snow over to the sheer precipice. Cautiously he peered over.

"Snow's too thick," he called.

"You, greaser, how many of your friends are down in the

canyon?"

"*Dos.*"

"Two?" demanded Pat sharply, rising to his feet. Guns still alert, he joined the group by the fire. "Two? Where's Pot Shot Touslin?"

"He be back soon," the shifty eyed Mexican answered.

"Where's he gone?"

The man shook his head. "No know."

Pat prodded him in the ribs with his pistol.

"Where's he gone?" he asked in a quietly dangerous voice.

"No know! No know." The man's eyes were terrified and lent conviction to his words.

"When did he go off?"

"Early—daylight."

"On a horse?"

The man nodded.

"Say when he'd be back?"

"Say—soon."

Pat thought it over rapidly.

"Ezra," he snapped. "Get down to the other end of the canyon from Alice and bottle it up in case those guards try to get out that end. Make it fast. They may both be down there twiddlin' their thumbs, not knowin' anything's wrong. We ain't heard nothing from Alice. . . . You, Sandy," he said in a low voice so that he couldn't be overheard, "look through all that stuff piled over there and see if there's any sign of the bank loot. I don't like Pot Shot goin' off like this."

Carefully, systematically, Sandy searched the big pile of saddles, blankets, and camp equipment.

"Nothin' here, Pat," he announced.

"Where's the rest of your stuff?" Stevens demanded of the Mexican.

The man shrugged. "That all," he muttered indifferently, but his eyes were intent and tense as he watched Darcy scattering things about.

"Where's money? Where's bank money?"

"It not there?" the man asked unbelievingly. "It not there?" he repeated in a higher voice.

Swiftly he turned to his companions and broke into a torrent of excited words.

"Did you get any of that?" Pat asked Sandy in a low voice.

"And how would I be knowing what the heathen says?"

"I got enough of it to understand that he's tellin' his friends that he thinks Pot Shot's hightailed it with all the jack, and left 'em here to hold the bag. . . . Is that right, greaser?"

The Mexican's eyes were smouldering, and his heavy mouth was distorted with rage.

"*Si, si, señor.* All the money it in beeg saddle bags."

"Nothing like that here," said Sandy.

"The son of a——," murmured Pat. "Probably thought after my break last night that things were gettin' hot, and he slipped away leaving the boys here to stop anything that came along, while he made his getaway."

"And snow to cover his tracks," muttered Sandy. "We'll never get him now."

"Humph," was Pat's answer. He thought for a moment. "Here, kid, let's get these boys down into the canyon where we can take care of 'em.—I'll take 'em down, and you load up the ponies with all this stuff and follow along.—I'm gettin' a little worried about that girl."

But when Pat marched his three captives down and around to the mouth of the canyon, he stopped worrying. There, sitting on a snow-covered rock, her knees crossed, her rifle nonchalantly in her lap, sat Alice. And twenty feet in front of her, seated in the snow, his hands up over his head sat a raging Mexican. His horse was ground tied behind him.

"My God," ejaculated Pat. "You went and *took* him."

"Said you wanted 'em alive, didn't you?" Alice grinned.

"I told you to cut him down. You shouldn't have taken the chance," muttered Pat, but his eyes were sparkling.

"It was easy. He came racing along when he heard the shot up above. I dropped a rope over him, pulled him off his pony, and he didn't have a chance to go for his gun."

"And if you'd missed your throw?" snapped Pat.

"Then I'd have shot him," she said coolly. "Pat—the truth is," her eyes dropped and she flushed with her confession, "I found—I—didn't want— to shoot him."

"Good girl," said Pat. "Any sign of the other greaser—or of Sam?"

"No."

"Pot Shot's slipped away," he told her. "You reckon you can take care of this quartet for a time, while I see about that other guard up the canyon?"

"Easy."

"Drop anyone of 'em who makes a move. Sandy'll be down in a jiffy with the horses."

Pat swung onto his horse, and rifle across his pummel, jogged off up the canyon. As he half expected, even before he reached the cave, he spied Ezra coming toward him, the fifth Mexican ahead of him, limping badly. Ezra was leading his horse.

And then he saw Sam.

The squat, thick little figure was sitting at the mouth of the cave, smoking a cigarette, philosophically watching the falling snow as though he were at the back door of his own house, with a warm kitchen fire behind him. He paid no attention to either Ezra or Pat as they approached from opposite directions.

Pat stopped in front of him and looked at him quizzically.

"Snowin'," Sam said finally. "Hope one of yuh jaspers got a match. I just used my last one."

"Like it up here in the winter?" grinned Pat.

"Oh, tol'able, tol'able. Too many folks around lately, though. Gettin' crowded. . . . Yuh plannin' to stay long?"

And then Ezra came up.

"What's Ez got there?" demanded Sam. "Looks like a greaser—and shot in the laig."

"You all right, Sam?" Ezra growled.

"Me? Sure I'm all right." Then he chuckled. "Yuh boys been busy?"

"The rest of 'em are all down there waitin'—except Pot Shot. He hightailed it when he smelled rats."

Sam turned to Pat, his eyes curious.

"Yuh son of a——, how in hell did yuh slip out o' here last night? There wasn't a sound, and till I heard the shot up on the rock just now, I thought yuh was gone for sure."

"There's two dead Mexes down there somewhere," said Pat shortly.—"Ez, leave that one here, and go down and help Alice bring up the rest of 'em. We'll put 'em in Sam's cave for the time being."

"That girl still hangin' around?" muttered Sam as Ezra went off.

"And she's good as a man any time," snapped Pat. "Only girl I've ever seen to touch her is Sally—and that's sayin' a lot."

An hour later, the five were settled around a big fire just at the mouth of the cave sheltered by the rock, eating. An elaborate meal of jerky, Mexican beans and chili, hot biscuits, dried apples, and coffee. Alice had made free with both the Mexican and American packs. Except for Darcy's rifle across his lap while he watched the dark tunnel of the cave, there was no sign of the five captives.

"Take 'em in some food, Sandy," suggested Pat. "Got to feed 'em if they're goin' to live to swing."

"Too bad Pot Shot got away from yuh boys," observed Sam.

"He hasn't got away—yet," Pat said significantly.

"What d'yuh mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Yuh ain't goin' on after him?"

Pat nodded.

"With eight inches of snow over his trail?" demanded Ezra.

"But what are you going to do about the five Mexicans back in there?" asked Alice. "You can't take them along. And Sam? He can't do anything with that ankle for days yet. I looked at it, and bandaged it up, but it's in bad shape, Pat."

"My ankle's all right, I reckon." Sam growled. "And we can hang them greasers right here. If Pat says we go on after Pot Shot, we go on."

"*You* ain't goin' any further, Sam," said Pat quietly, "and those greasers are goin' to Dutch Springs for trial. From here on, I play a lone hand."

Sam and Ezra looked at Pat as though he were crazy. Darcy reappeared from the depths of the cavern and rejoined the group.

"What's up?" he demanded, noting the strained silence.

"Well, Stevens here has been eatin' loco weed, though how he got it up here in the mountains with all this snow beats me," drawled Sam.

"You can't do it, Pat," cried Alice.

"Do what?" demanded Darcy impatiently.

"This is the way I see it," Pat said quietly. "With Pot Shot alone, I don't need no help. If one man can't find him, he can't be found at all. And once I come up to him, I'll be all right alone. From here on it's goin' to be pretty tough with the snow and all. I got to go on, 'cause I was sworn in as Sheriff to get Touslin. But that don't carry for you all. When I brought you along, I needed you 'cause there was a gang. Well, we've rounded up the gang, and you all are goin' to take 'em home. Now it's just Pot Shot and me."

"Some things you kind of forget, Pat," said Darcy.

"No, I don't forget nothin', kid. Any one of those greasers in there might have murdered your brother. You don't know

it was Pot Shot."

"And my father?" asked Alice in a low tense voice.

Pat looked at her with compassion in his eyes. "I'll settle that score, Alice. I want you to get right up to Dutch Springs, settle down at the Lazy Mare along with Sally, and wait till I get back. Sally'll be right glad to have company, and you'll feel sort of at home there. Now, for the rest of you. Sam here, with his ankle, can't go no further. He couldn't even get back to Powder Valley without someone to lift him on and off a horse. . . . You, Alice, you can't go on from here. It's too tough, even for you, and I daren't send those greasers back through the mountains without a real guard."

"To hell with Sam and them greasers," growled Ezra. "I'm stringin' along with you."

"So'm I," declared Sandy.

Pat shook his head. "Sandy, you got to get this girl back to town. And Ezra's needed, too. One Mex by hisself is nothin'. But five of 'em together—that's different. I've seen those snakes in action."

"Then let Pot Shot go," urged Alice.

"I started out to *get* Touslin," Pat said significantly.

"We ain't goin' to do what yuh say, Pat, and that's all," Sam growled. "Yuh better be thinkin' of something else."

Pat looked from face to face of his four companions. Then he took out the makings and began to roll a cigarette.

"All right," he said easily. "We'll have a pow-wow about it later. . . . Ezra, I'd better be takin' the best Bar ES horse of the string. Pull his shoes off and get him rough shod, will you. And you all better do the same for your own cayuses with this snow and ice. I'm goin' in and visit with them greasers and see what I can pick up about Pot Shot and his habits. Those hombres ought to be mighty sore by this time, and willin' to talk some."

Silently the four watched Pat as he disappeared into the cave.

9. "She Didn't Say So, but She Will"

And what the hell are yuh cowboys goin' to do about *this*," demanded Sam morosely. "Pat's on the prod, and there's no gettin' near him."

"I'm ridin' with him," said Sandy flatly.

Ezra shook his head. His eye rolled dangerously. "I've played 'long with Pat for some years now. You, Darcy, kin take the back trail along with the others."

"One thing's sure," observed Sam. "Only *one* of yuh can go. Better draw for it."

Ezra and Sandy looked at each other almost with hostility.

"What about that, Ezra?" Sandy demanded.

Ezra nodded. "I reckon," he muttered.

Sam scooped up a handful of pebbles from the rocky ground, and examined his catch. Then he carefully selected a white pebble and a red pebble of about the same size.

"One for one hand, one for the other," he droned. "The red stone rides with Pat. The white stone goes back."

He shook the two pebbles up, one hand cupped over the other. Then he separated his hands, and held them out toward Darcy.

Sandy studied the two clenched fists as though his eyes could pierce the heavy flesh and bones and see what lay within.

"Alice, which of those ugly hands is holding the red?" Sandy demanded gaily.

"I don't know, myself," muttered Sam.

"I'd choose the right," said Alice slowly.

"Then it's the right I'll be takin'," Darcy said at last with a confident air.

Deliberately, one by one, Sam opened up the fingers of his right hand. The red pebble lay there in his palm.

"God damn the Irish," muttered Ezra. "See here, Sandy ——"

"That's settled, with nothing more to be said," snapped

Darcy. "Now, how are we goin' to get around Pat, and then what?"

Sam chuckled. "Ezra 'n' me've been tryin' to get around Pat for years, and we ain't never succeeded."

"Sandy, you've just got to pretend that you're going back with us, and then follow him," said Alice.

Sam nodded. "If yuh lay low and he don't know yuh're with him for six or eight hours, it'll be too late for him to do anything about it. Take yuhr own grub and everythin'."

"Where'll he be headin'?"

"God knows. But wherever he heads, he'll end up with Pot Shot Touslin lookin' into his gun," said Sam grimly. "Yuh're in for it now."

Sandy rose. "I'll get a pack ready. . . . Want to come with me, Alice?" he asked diffidently.

The girl flashed him a warm smile, and jumped to her feet. Side by side the two walked slowly out into the snow that still drifted steadily down, and started off down the canyon toward the spot where the horses were picketed.

They were silent for a time. Finally Alice looked up at the tall, rangy man beside her.

"Sandy, you'll be careful?" she said in a low voice.

"And what else would I be?" he asked lightly.

"I—I almost wish that Ezra had got the red rock."

"Those that travel with Patrick Stevens come to no harm. That's well known."

"I'll be worrying."

He stopped short and faced her. Her dark eyes were clouded. "You'll be worrying?" he repeated slowly.

Alice nodded. "I wish I were going with you," she confessed. "Will Mrs. Stevens mind me turning up at the Lazy Mare?"

"Sally? Sally's the grandest woman in Colorado, bar one," Darcy cried. "Oh, Alice, I don't know exactly how I'd be telling you how I feel—Well, it seems as though I'd do almost anything in the world for you," he finished slowly.

"You have already, Sandy."

"It's good that Pat wants you to go to the Lazy Mare and wait there. It's right near Dutch Springs."

"And Dutch Springs is where you live," the girl said absently.

Awkwardly Sandy took her strong, thin, brown hand in his. She let it lie there, but her eyebrows rose questioningly.

"If it weren't for what Touslin did—up at Dutch Springs, and again down at your place—I'd be taking you back to Dutch Springs myself now. I reckon you know that, don't you, Alice?"

"Would you?"

"Just as soon as Touslin's been paid what we owe him ——"

Sandy stopped and faced her. The eyes, usually so merry and carefree, were serious. There was no sign of the infectious smile that won Sandy friends on sight. He needed help. Alice knew it, but she'd given him all the help he was going to get. They were out of sight of the cave now and Sandy was kicking around in the snow, self-consciously.

"I love you, Alice!" he burst out at last. "And I've never said that before to a girl."

"Never?"

"No. Oh, shucks. The world knows I'm no angel, and I've been around some, but—well, this is different."

Alice studied the curly-headed Irishman soberly. He stood in front of her, nervous, tense, embarrassed. He was good to look at with his bright blue eyes set above a straight nose and a wide, generous mouth. Lean, rangy, with the lithe power of a wildcat surging under his polished brown skin.

"Sandy Darcy, what do you do with yourself when you're not chasing outlaws?" she demanded suddenly.

"Me?" said Sandy, taken aback. "Why I—I reckon I do most anything."

"Meaning?"

"I've worked in the feed store, and I've busted horses, and

I've worked with cattle some. Oh, and I used to take the stage up from Hopewell Junction for a time."

"Ever have a steady job—for long?"

"No, it's restless I've been," he confessed. "But that's over. My brother Tom worked in the bank for a right long time until——"

"Yes, I know," Alice said softly.

"Alice, if you'd only——"

He couldn't go on.

"If I'd only what?" she had to ask finally.

"Marry me!" he blurted out.

"I've only known you three—four days."

"We'll get us some land out near the Lazy Mare. It's so rich there in Powder Valley, the grass jumps up under your feet whilst you're walking. And we'll start ranching. I've got a little money put by and——"

"I haven't said I'd marry you, Sandy."

Darcy's self confidence was coming back, and his eyes were sparkling.

"You will, though, just as soon as I get back to Dutch Springs," he cried, and with an impetuous movement caught the girl up in his arms and held her close. "I love you, Alice," he repeated in a low, urgent voice. "I found you almost dead, and you came back to life, and it's to me you belong."

They stood there motionless, in the lee of an overhanging rock. Her face was hidden against Sandy's shoulder. Finally she raised her head and looked soberly into his eyes.

"You sure of yourself, Irish?" she whispered, her voice trembling a little. "Forever?"

In answer his lips crushed against hers.

After a breathless moment, she pulled herself away from him reluctantly.

"Oh, Sandy, I'll be glad to get you back—terribly glad. But—now—if you're going after Pat—you'd better get set to travel. I'm going back to the fire. And here comes Ezra,

anyway."

He stared down at her for a moment weighing her words. Then his whole face lit up with joy.

He linked his arm in hers and, without another word, they turned and started down the canyon where the horses stood huddled together for warmth against the cold driving snow.

When Alice got back to the fire at the mouth of the cave, Pat was crouching there beside Sam, warming his hands. He grinned at her as she came up.

"This coffee of yours is mighty good. Have some more?"

Alice shook her head dreamily. She was still living through the experience she's just had. She was in love. Darcy had asked her to marry him. When he got back from——

"Maybe we'd better not be botherin' her when she's thinkin'."

The words came drifting through her preoccupied thoughts from the world outside, and jerked her back to her surroundings.

"What was that?" she demanded guiltily. "I didn't hear what you said."

Sam spat into the fire. "Yuh sure didn't," he drawled. "Folks could have told yuh there was a rattler curlin' around yuhr neck, and yuh wouldn't have heard."

Pat was chuckling, and his eyes were crinkling with amusement.

"What did you say?" Alice repeated, turning to him with a flush.

"I was askin' you, knowin' this country some, what your guess would be on the easiest and fastest way to get to Taos."

"Taos? Why Taos?"

"Well, from what I picked up from the greasers back in there, I figure Pot Shot's likely to cut through the range up here somewhere and head straight for Santa Fé. Taos is right on his way, isn't it?"

Alice nodded.

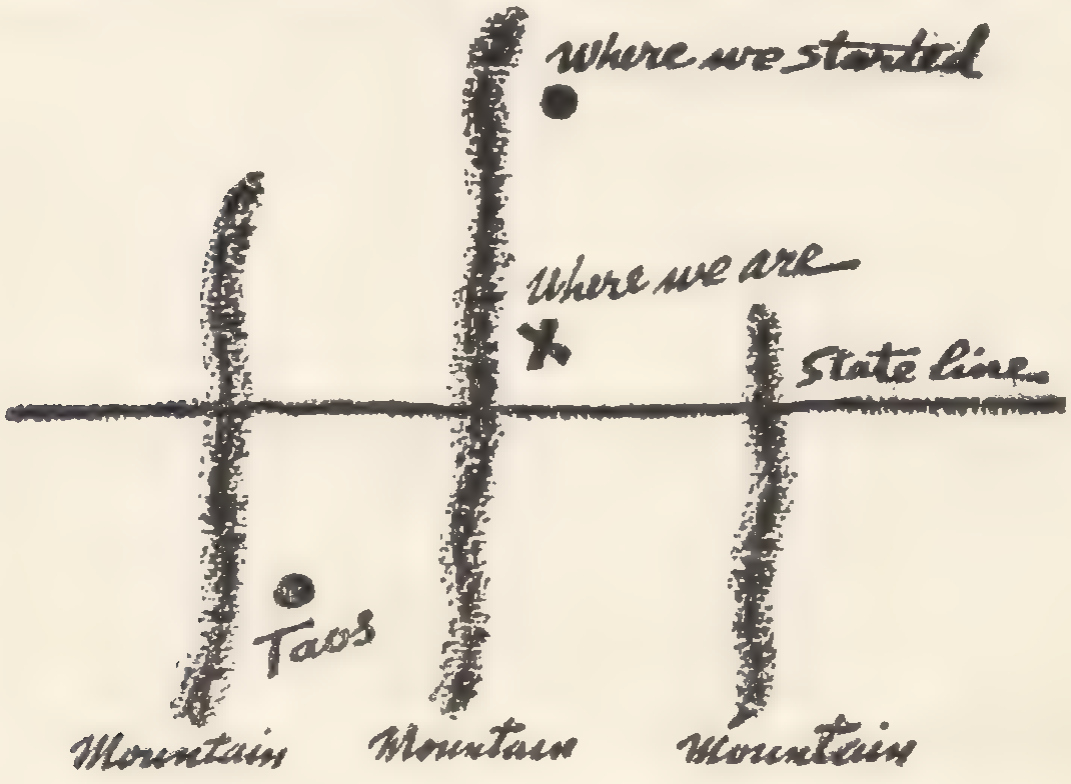
"If I could hit Taos before *he* does, it might save some trouble. Trailin' him now is out."

"Taos is almost all Mex and Indian," said Alice thoughtfully.

"But there ain't as *many* Mexicans in Taos as there is in Santa Fé," Sam pointed out grimly. "And there is limits to what Pat can take on with two guns, spite of what he says."

"If he beats me to Taos, I'll be able to pick up his trail there, and follow him on down. But I feel in my bones he's striking for Taos," Pat explained. "I went over the Reis River Pass once but we're still way north of that."

"Yes, way north," Alice agreed. She smoothed off a few square feet of ground near to the fire, and picked up some small stones. "Here's Taos, about. And the Rio Grande. And here's where we started from," she said thoughtfully, putting down two of her stones. Then she traced some irregular lines up between the markers. "This is the range," she explained. "From now on, most of what I'm showing is what I sort of picked up from Dad talking. He knew this



country like a book. It's probably about right, but I can't be sure, Pat."

"Go ahead," he urged.

"We're probably about here, north of the state line, having come up something like this."

She went on elaborating her crude map, telling all she knew.

Pat studied it carefully.

"That's just about the way I'd figure it," he agreed.

"I'd work due south, keeping as close to the big range as you can until you hit the Reis River Pass. It's the safest."

Pat Stevens frowned. "There must be some pass through the range up here, or Pot Shot would have cut south long before this."

"Yeah, but how in hell are yuh goin' to find it?" Sam growled. "Touslin, he knows where it is."

"I'll never hit Taos ahead of him if I swing south now."

"You'll never hit Taos at all if yuh don't," Sam retorted.

"Bettin' on that?" demanded Pat.

"I ain't bet with you in seven years, an' yuh knows it," said Sam dryly. "*That,* ma'am," he went on, turning to Alice, "means the fool is goin' to try it up here."

Pat rose, and for a few moments stared out into the falling snow. "Sam," he said finally, over his shoulder, "you'll be sort of in charge of things goin' back, in spite of your leg. You turn those greasers over to the boys at Dutch Springs, and tell 'em not to do anythin' about a trial till I get back with Pot Shot—and see that Alice gets to the Lazy Mare—and if I get back and find any of you bushwhackers has told Sally anything about this here little trip that'll worry her, I'll skin you alive."

"Oh, no," Sam snorted sarcastically. "We won't tell Sally nothin' about what yuh're doin'. If we did, she'd leave yuh for bein' a crazy man. We'll just tell that yuh've met up with a troop of U. S. Cavalry and havin' the cavalry to play with, yuh figured not to need us no longer—and the captain

makes yuh ride in the rear of the column so's if yore horse stumbles and yuh fall off, there won't be no one to step on yuh and hurt yuh. An'——"

"Reckon I'd better get things fixed up to start," Pat broke in. "Sooner I get goin', the better. Alice, you and Sam make a pile of grub I'll be needin'—for four or five days is enough and go light. I'm goin' down to see about my horse. Any of that corn left?"

Sam shook his head.

"Then he'll have to eat snow."

And Pat stamped out into the snow.

"Will he make it, Sam?" demanded Alice in a low voice. More than half her mind was on Sandy Darcy who would necessarily follow wherever Pat led.

"He always has," muttered Sam. "An' I reckon he always will. That hombre is shot with luck, and when he dies, he won't have his shoes on."

"And Sandy Darcy?" Alice murmured absently. "Is he lucky, too?"

"That black Irishman?" Sam said slyly. "Now, that's different. He's a bad 'un. He'll end up with a noose around his neck, for sure."

"Oh, I hate you," flared Alice.

"He's headed straight for it." Sam's face was perfectly straight. "Unless some smart gal rides up and ropes him, ties him down, and sits on his head. Then, mebbe, he'd have a chance," he added.

"We'd better be tending to Pat's grub," Alice said hastily.

When night fell on that strange red canyon, it was deserted. For a few brief hours men had invaded its still depths. They had come with their horses and their saddles, their food, and their guns. They had behaved as all men do, cursing each other, fighting and killing each other—even loving each other. Now they had disappeared, and the red canyon would be filled again with silence, with only the

changing seasons, the quiet coming and going of wild animals, and the erosion of time to mark the passing of the years.

First one man had packed his horse, and, after a brief farewell, had ridden west. Then soon after a second man rode west, his saddle too, packed high, his mind laden with much good advice from his two jealous companions, his thoughts divided between the adventure ahead of him and the girl he was leaving behind. Then five sullen, reluctant figures were marched out of the cave, their hands tied behind them. The five were pushed up on to four horses and the one mule. Finally, a squat man who limped badly was helped into his saddle, and took the lead down the canyon. A girl swung lightly onto her horse. The last figure gave one last sour look around the camp, mounted, and followed the procession eastward.

On the way down the canyon, they passed, one after the other, four white mounds; two horses, two men, who would be there shrouded in snow now until the spring.

* * *

The trail in the snow that Sandy Darcy was following swung southwest from the mouth of the canyon, leading across the table-land directly toward a low saddle in the granite range ahead.

He'd given Pat a head start of only half an hour, and the trail was still plain. The snow was not coming down quite as heavily now, but it was growing much colder. The only way Sandy had of judging how far Pat was ahead of him was by how the tracks had filled, and making allowance for the lighter fall, he tried to keep his distance. For he had decided not to make an appearance until late that night. He couldn't take the chance of waiting until morning, because two hours of snow would obliterate Pat's tracks forever.

His pony moved forward at a steady walk, his head down, for they were heading right into the wind. Pat had taken the horse Darcy had been riding, so Sandy had the horse he

had brought from the Bar ES for Alice. The horse was a little undersized, but had a wide, deep chest, a short back, and powerful legs, a better type of animal even than Sandy's own prized bronc for the kind of work that lay ahead.

When he reached the edge of the table-land, the ground ahead of him dropped away into a little valley almost as though it had been cut away with a knife. Pat's tracks led right to the rim and disappeared.

Sandy pushed his horse up to the very edge and looked down. It seemed impossible that a horse could have made that descent in the snow. But there the tracks were, and he could see the slipping, slithering trail straight down the hill. From where he was, it looked as though Pat's horse must have sat down and coasted on his rump.

"I wouldn't be liking to be turning that gent off from going in any direction he decided he was going to take," he muttered. "Come on, bronc, we're for it. If that other Bar ES cayuse coasted down that slide, you'll be doing it, too."

And down the pony went, ploughing a deep furrow in the snow, slipping, sliding, helpless once the start was made, but finally ending up in the valley on all fours.

Sandy, looking back up with self satisfied admiration for the feat, realized that it was only because of the snow that they had been able to make it. Pat Stevens was wiser than he seemed, Sandy decided.

South along the valley for a mile, and then straight west again up a ravine. And so on, mile after mile, south, west, south again, but always wherever possible working west and higher and higher toward the crest of the ridge.

Dusk came on, and with the uncertain light Sandy began to have difficulties with the trail except where, as now in a narrow gulch, Pat was obviously following some natural contour of the land. If by any chance Pat pushed on too long——

"God damn the Irish! You son of a——!"

The furious voice crackled out from behind a big snow-

drift close by in the gulch.

"Pat!"

Pat Stevens straightened up from where he had been crouching, his rifle over his arm. Disgustedly he inspected the man on horseback.

"You lost?" he finally demanded sarcastically.

Darcy shook his head, and grinned.

"Bring th' others along with you?" went on Pat, his voice getting more and more caustic.

"No. You see, Pat——"

"Yeah, I see all right! I told you to head for Dutch Springs—and here you are. That's what I see! You can damn well turn right around and tail it back again.".

Darcy shook his head, unperturbed. "It's too late. I'd never be catchin' up with the others."

"I told you I was playin' a lone hand, and I meant it. I don't need no one taggin' after me like a nurse, Darcy."

"But——"

"Who the devil you think is Sheriff, you or me? Didn't no one ever tell you what orders were?"

Darcy flushed. He flung off his horse, and faced the angry man.

"Listen, damn it. When you and I started out from Dutch Springs, did you tell me I would be playing the last hand in the showdown with Touslin?"

"That was before——"

"Did you, or didn't you?" snapped Sandy.

"Yes, I did," admitted Pat reluctantly.

"Well, here I am—and from now on I'll be stickin' to you like a flea to a dog. You know damn well, Stevens, that the only reason you wouldn't let either Ezra or me come along was because you knew it would be touch and go."

"You're just a kid. And that girl——" Pat was muttering. "You've no right——"

"Yeah? I've heard some stories about you, Pat Stevens, that'd make that white horse you got over in the trees turn

red with shame to be carrying you."

"All right, all right," snapped Pat irritably. "You're here, and it's your own fault, not mine. Before we get through, you'll wish to hell you hadn't come."

Sandy shuffled over through the drift to where Pat was standing, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Ezra and I drew lots to see who'd be coming," he explained. "There wasn't no one there who was goin' to let you ride alone."

"Might've known you bushwhackers'd pull somethin' on me," Pat muttered. "Well, I'm glad it was you. Ezra didn't want to come on this posse at all, and Sam and I made him."

"Where you campin'?"

Pat pointed to the trees.

"Less snow in there."

"I don't see no fire."

"There's no fire to see," said Pat grimly. "Touslin may be thirty miles from here and he may be around the next bend of this ravine. We're takin' no chances. You'll chew dry jerky and wash it down with cold water for your dinner tonight, Irish."

"That'll be fine," sighed Sandy.

"An' you better get busy about your horse," Pat went on with relish in his voice. "Took me better than half an hour to get enough moss and stuff out from under the snow to fill a tin plate—and that's not goin' to keep no horse alive."

"I sure hope Dutch Springs is payin' us big salaries," muttered Sandy, "'cause we're goin' to be earnin' it before we're through."

"You're supposed to drawin' just a dollar and a quarter a day," said Pat dryly. "And you're lucky if you ever get back to Dutch Springs to cash in."

Sandy staked his horse by Stevens' in the woods, and with difficulty found forage of a kind. Then he chewed at some of the dried salt beef and gulped down the cold coffee left in his canteen. By the time he had cut some pine boughs for a

bed, and rolled up in his blankets. Pat was already asleep.

It seemed but a few minutes later that someone was shaking him awake.

"For the love of Mary, what's eatin' you?" he muttered sleepily. "It's still night."

"Yeah, about midnight, but it's stopped snowin' and the moon is up. It's light enough to travel, and that means us."

"What about the horses? They'll be dropping with the little rest they've had in the last few days."

"They'll have to stand it. We can get fresh horses at Taos if we have to."

"If they get us that far," Sandy grinned sleepily. He rose stiffly, stretched, and picked up his saddle. "Ridin' along with you, Pat, is somethin' I'll be telling my grandchildren about."

"You wanted to come," his companion chuckled. "And as I been tellin' you, you probably aren't goin' to live long enough to have any grandchildren."

"If I do, I'll warn them to keep away from any brats named Stevens," Sandy retorted. "Well, let's go. What are we waiting for?" Then he grinned. "I'm in a hurry to get back to Dutch Springs," he explained.

"What did she say when you asked her?" Pat asked seriously. "Will she marry you, Sandy?"

"She didn't *say* so, but she will," the Irishman said confidently.

Pat nodded thoughtfully as he cinched up his horse.

"I thought so," he said.

10. "Hoglegs for a Warrant"

Thirty-six hours later two haggard-faced men pulled up their horses as they reached the crest of a low bluff and looked down over the fertile valley of the upper Rio Grande. On this side of the range there was no snow whatsoever and it was much warmer. The gray green valley stretched away

in front of them for miles, west and south, broken just ahead of them by the wide, rolling Taos mesa. And below, the Rio Grande appeared again out of the rocky chasm that slashed through the valley, and flowed on down toward Santa Fé.

Below them they could see the two Indian communal pueblos facing each other a few hundred yards apart, and beyond, the old Mexican town of one-story adobe houses centered around a plaza and straggling out like crooked spiders' legs toward the hills to the east and the plain to the west. To the south a few miles, the clustered Ranchos de Taos.

"Well, there she is," Pat muttered. "Told you we'd make it."

"What's left of us," croaked Darcy through his cracked lips. "Suppose Pot Shot's hit town yet?"

"Dunno."

The two men's eyes were feverishly bright. Their faces were gaunt and drawn from lack of sleep and little food. As Pat had prophesied, they'd struck a cut through the range, following the course of a boiling mountain stream, and come into the valley opposite Ute Peak. Then they had borne directly south.

"Glory be to God that Ezra isn't here to see his horses now," Darcy muttered, looking down at their exhausted animals.

Pat's horse was badly lamed. Sandy's bronc still had four feet under him, but showed plainly what he'd been put through the last two days.

Pat shook his head. "I sure hate to use horse flesh this way, but——"

"They won't be getting much further—especially that nag of yours."

"If we have to go on from here, we'll see if we can pick up a couple of Indian ponies. They're the only good stock around these parts. Those little Mexican animals are too small and scrawny for a white man."

"What about these Indians?"

"They're all right if you treat 'em right—mighty peaceful. They don't like the greasers, and they put up a show of fight if the Navajos come sneakin' up here out of their own country looking for trouble, but those Indians are our best bet."

"How come?"

" 'Cause you and me ridin' into Taos cold—provided Pot Shot's there—would be sort of like stickin' your hand into a hornet's nest. These Mexicans down here just plain hanker for a chance to polish their knives on a strange gringo, and I reckon Pot Shot would give 'em plenty of excuse. We'll just mosey down to the north pueblo and see what turns up."

"Lord, how I'd like some hot food again."

"You'll get your food hot all right down here—full of chili."

"How will you be talking to them?"

"Never any trouble makin' an Indian understand what you mean. Just takes time and calls for a little thinkin' out. . . . We better get into that stream down there and wash some. We ain't exactly respectable lookin', and those Taos Indians——"

"Wash up for an Indian?" frowned Sandy.

"You Irish are a dirty lot compared with them Pueblo Indians," Pat said dryly. "They gotta take a bath every day and they wash their heads once a week."

"By all the saints!" muttered Sandy. He looked back at the range they'd just left behind them and shivered.

"Pat, outside now I'm not so cold. It seems right pleasant here, but inside I won't ever be thawing out again."

"You and me are goin' to impress those Indians," Pat went on thoughtfully. "We'll act like I was President of the U. S. and you the Governor of Colorado."

The pair descended to the arroyo ahead, dismounted, stripped off some of their heavy clothes, and crawled down the banks of the turbulent creek that was racing down to join the Rio Grande. They washed as well as they could,

and then straightened up the general lay of their packs.

"The President sure is riding a mighty fine horse," Sandy grinned. "Seems to me we better ask Congress for some money for another. This one sure looks tuckered."

"We'll pin our decorations on where they'll show," grinned Pat, bringing out his Sheriff's badge. "I tell you we're *important* and this star looks good. . . . Come on."

They rode down from the hills, and as they got nearer the pueblos, they began passing through the fields cultivated by the Indians. They were bare now, but there were traces of beans, and corn stalks, wheat, with occasional small fields where potatoes had been grown. To the west, they saw several large herds of sheep grazing.

"What are all these huts scattered around in the fields?" demanded Sandy.

"The Indians live in 'em in the summer. See that boy runnin' yonder?" Pat demanded, pointing across to a low ridge running along almost parallel to their path. "He's seen us and's on his way to the pueblos to tell 'em two strange white men are ridin' in from the north. By the time we get there, they'll be ready and waitin' for us."

"I don't like Indians," muttered Sandy.

"You'll like these. They're fine people."

"Make pottery and things, don't they?"

"Not in this pueblo, much. Best pottery comes from further south. Santa Clara and around there. These Taos Indians farm, mostly."

Sandy studied the communal houses curiously as they rode nearer. He had heard about pueblos, but this was the first he'd ever seen.

From among a confusion of scattered one-story huts, rose two, tiered brownish-gray structures; one five, the other six storeys high. They were terraced so that the roof of one storey formed, irregularly, balconies for the dwellers on the storey above. Occasional ladders led up from the ground to the second storey balcony and again from there up to the

third, and so on. Small square windows showed here and there, large enough for light and air, too small to be dangerously vulnerable in case of attack. On the ground outside the pueblos Sandy noticed the big-bellied bread ovens and in front of each pueblo high wooden racks for drying meat.

Bright blankets and washing hanging everywhere on the porches made brilliant spots of color against the neutral monotony of the gray plastered walls.

"Some one told me they built those *all* out of adobe brick and nothin' else," Sandy marveled.

"Adobe brick, saplings and poles for ceilings, and plaster outside. Even those ovens are adobe. They do everything with adobe except eat it."

The open spaces in front of the pueblos were deserted, and the doors on the ground floor were closed. A few stray dogs sniffed around, and a burro grazed on the rise behind the pueblo, but there was no other sign of life.

"They're ready for us, all right," grinned Pat. "All been ordered inside by the headman until they see what we want. Hundreds of 'em watchin' you, though. Darcy, so don't forget yourself."

"What's that round mound to the side?"

"That's one of their estufas and you stay clear of it, see?"

"What's an estufa?"

"Religious temple, underground. They go down into it on a ladder. They got about five of 'em here at Taos. But the less you know about an estufa the safer you are."

"Why?"

"It's sacred. I once knew a hard-boiled jasper from over San Antonio way who thought he'd look over an estufa down near Santa Clara. He got down into it all right, but no one ever saw him come up."

"What happened?"

Pat Stevens shrugged. "The Indians said they'd never seen him. But—well, I've never met but one white man who's been down in an estufa."

"Well, I'm damn glad to know something you've not had the nerve to try!"

Pat looked at his companion with a little smile.

"It was mighty interesting," he murmured.

Sandy looked at him in disgust. "I give up," he muttered.

They rode up slowly to the pueblo.

"Whatever you do, do it slow," cautioned Pat. "Get off your horse slow, and don't jump around or make any sudden gestures. Take it easy."

Following his own words, Pat deliberately swung his leg over his horse, and dropped stiffly to the ground. He let his pony's reins drag, strolled away half a dozen yards, and sat down cross-legged.

"Come on over here," he said to Sandy. "We're goin' to have a smoke. Sit down facin' me."

Sandy wandered over and sat down with his back to the pueblo. They both rolled cigarettes, lit them, and began to smoke.

"Now what do we do?" demanded Sandy.

"Wait," said Pat laconically.

Five minutes passed, and then Sandy read in Stevens' eyes that something was happening. But Pat did not move, or did the grave expression on his face change. Sandy felt the presence of someone behind him.

Then came a non-committal grunt from just above him.

Pat inclined his head solemnly.

"How," he said.

Silently a big Indian glided around Sandy and squatted down between the two white men. He was dark. His skin shone as though it had been polished with wax. His hair fell over his shoulders in two heavy black braids tied at the ends with red cotton. He wore glistening white buckskin moccasins, and a white cotton blanket was draped around his powerful body.

He looked at Sandy pointedly and repeated his guttural grunt.

"How," said Darcy, following Pat's lead.

Silently the three sat there. Pat's face was relaxed, his eyes half-closed almost as though he were dozing off. The Indian's sharp, fine, aquiline face was expressionless. He appeared to be meditating on the gray mountains above him.

Finally after a long interval, Pat reached deliberately into his breast pocket, pulled out tobacco and papers, and offered them to the Indian.

He grunted again, took the tobacco, and gravely began to roll a cigarette for himself. Then he handed the makings on to Sandy.

For another few minutes the three smoked in silence, but now the Indian was studying the strangers surreptitiously. Sandy could see his eyes travelling, and coming back time after time to the glistening star that Pat had prophesied would give them caste.

"Hungry," Pat said at last quite impersonally. Then he patted his stomach and with his mouth went through the motions of eating. Then he pointed to Sandy, himself, and the ponies. "Hungry," he repeated slowly, and smiled at their host.

The Indian rose slowly, and disappeared inside the pueblo. In a few moments he was back with a second, much younger Indian trailing behind him. And at the same time the news that the visitors were not dangerous but merely two hungry men seemed to have spread as though by magic through the pueblo. Doors opened here and there. Faces appeared at windows. Three or four more curious spirits even appeared on the balconies outside their dwellings.

The two Indians were seated again, completing the conference circle. The ceremony of the cigarettes was repeated.

"Spik American," announced the younger Indian unexpectedly. "You American?"

Pat looked at him with interest. "Yes, we're American."

"Sante Fé school. Learn American. You eat food, eh?"

"Yes." Pat nodded. "Very hungry. Horses hungry, too."

The Indian studied the ponies, then shook his head.

"Bad. Bad."

"Hard long ride. Horses tired."

"Food come soon."

"Thanks. You speak mighty good American."

The Indian looked gratified, and turning to his companion rattled off something that made the older man grunt.

"He chief, head man," the young Indian explained.

"Sure. Big chief. We big American chiefs, too. You tell him." And Pat pointed to his sheriff's star.

"Me know that. See that thing before. Star, eh? You come far?"

Pat nodded, and made a sweeping gesture to the north.

"Why?" the Indian asked simply.

Pat looked him steadily in the eye. "We chiefs from north, we like Indians," he said slowly. "We no like Mexicans."

The boy's eyes flickered, and again he translated to his chief.

"Pat," said Sandy in a low voice, "a kid's leadin' off our horses."

"To feed 'em," said Pat. "And here comes grub for us."

A fat squaw was waddling out toward them from the pueblo bearing a big steaming bowl. She put it down before them, and hurried back without even seeming to look at the strangers.

Pat offered the bowl to the chief, and when he refused to partake, to his interpreter, who shook his head.

"No hungry, us," he said. "You eat."

It was a fragrant mutton stew, with big peas, and thick with rice grease. Pat promptly plunged his hand into the bowl, and scooped out a handful. Darcy followed suit.

"Good. Good," Pat complimented his hosts after he had consumed a quantity of the dish. "You got plenty ponies?"

The Indian obviously did not understand.

"Horses. You got plenty horses?"

The brown face lit up. "Yes. Us got horses."

"Sell horses maybe? Our horses sick.

That called for translation.

"You buy horses?" he asked after a guttural exchange with his chief.

"Maybe. Maybe we go Santa Fé. *Maybe,*" Pat explained pointedly.

"Maybe you stay Taos?" The Indian's face was expressionless, but Sandy felt that he knew that something was behind Pat's words.

"Many Mexicans in Taos," Pat observed casually. "You know Taos Mexicans?"

"See Mexicans. Not good friends Mexicans."

"No, Mexicans not good friends. But you see Mexicans often, yes?"

The Indian nodded gravely.

"Today, yesterday maybe, one Mexican come from north, riding like us."

It was a flat statement, addressed not to the Indian, but to anyone who happened to be listening. In the same impersonal tone, Pat went on:

"Mexican, Pot Shot Touslin. Ear slit like cow." He held up two fingers in a V. "Face like rabbit. No teeth upstairs. No good Mexican."

The interpreter said a few words to the chief. The old man turned and regarded Pat with a flicker of interest in his eye.

"No know. Maybe. No know," said the Indian.

Pat reached into his pants and pulled out a silver dollar. He played with it in his hand for a minute. It was new and bright and shining when the sun hit it. Finally Pat put it down on the ground near the almost empty pot of stew.

"Very good food. Present for squaw who cook, see?"

It would never do openly to offer the chief payment for

the meal, Pat knew, but he was not worrying about what would happen to his dollar. After his words had been translated, the old man reached out silently and took possession of the money.

Then Pat took out another dollar, and put it down on the ground beside his own foot.

"Mexican with ear like cow and face like rabbit, maybe he in Taos. Maybe he come, maybe not. Maybe he leave quick. Maybe Santa Fé. Maybe we buy horses. Who knows?"

With a deliberate, significant gesture he picked the dollar up again and, shrugging his shoulders, put it back in his pocket.

The interpreter muttered something to the chief, and then turned to Pat.

"Chief say, 'Smoke,' " he announced.

Pat took out his tobacco again and passed it over. It went the rounds and the four sat there silent for a time. The Indians smoked with short quick puffs, holding their cigarettes gingerly between their forefingers and thumbs.

Finally the old chief rose, and without a word re-entered the pueblo. The interpreter followed him.

"Is it goin' to work?" demanded Sandy.

Pat nodded. "Wait and see," he said.

Before long the squaw appeared again, and took away the remnants of the meal.

"You sure they'll work for us?"

"Wouldn't have had that last smoke unless. That's what it meant. But the old boy wouldn't want you to think he was in a hurry to get that dollar. It will be a present, that dollar. Not payment. Bet you half a dozen boys have sneaked out of the back of the pueblo already and are on their way to town to find out whether Touslin's around."

"The chief looked interested when he heard you was lookin' for Touslin."

"Probably knows more about Pot Shot than we do."

The normal life of the pueblo had been resumed except

in the immediate vicinity of the group in the sun. Fat, brown infants were playing around everywhere. Squaws were bustling around busy with their household duties, fetching water from the creek, cleaning moccasins with the white clay that made them so brilliantly white, building fires in the great round bread ovens that dotted the ground all around the pueblo, hanging up long narrow strips of meat on the racks to dry in the sun, drying and scraping skins that would be used for everything from drums to shirts.

Perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes passed.

"Say, look at that, Pat!"

Pat turned to where Sandy was pointing. Around the corner of the pueblo an Indian boy had appeared with their horses. Behind him came two more boys, each leading four shaggy Indian ponies.

Pat chuckled. "That old chief ain't missin' any tricks. He's got ponies in from the range for us to look over just in case. And you can bet your last dollar all those ponies are from *his* string and no one else's."

The boys tied the ponies up to the poles of the drying rack, and disappeared again. Then the old chief sauntered out from the pueblo and joined his guests. Once again they smoked in silence.

Before long their friend the interpreter reappeared and took his place without speaking.

Again they smoked, and Sandy began to fidget impatiently. It seemed to him that much valuable time was being wasted.

At last the young Indian looked directly at Pat.

"Maybe little cow ear Mexican come Taos last night late."

"Yesterday?" asked Pat indifferently.

The Indian nodded. "But he gone now."

"Alone?"

"No alone. Two big Mexicans, too."

"Which way?"

The Indian pointed south.

"Santa Fé?"

"No know. They took trail." And again he pointed south. "Maybe you want horse. Mexican, too, get new horse Taos."

"Maybe. When did cow ear Mexican leave Taos?"

"With sun, morning. Ride fast, maybe too fast."

Pat looked at Sandy with a triumphant grin.

"You win," the Irishman muttered.

Pat turned back to the Indian.

"You tell chief we friends, good friends." He took out the dollar. "You tell chief big white chiefs from north give him present because good friends. American dollar," he pointed out carefully, "worth twice Mexican dollar. Now maybe we look at horses."

"You seen that buckskin stallion over at the end of the line?" Sandy whispered.

Pat nodded, and rising, led the way toward the ponies. He examined them all casually.

"Looks like probably the buckskin and the roan, don't it?" he asked Darcy.

"Either the roan or the tan next the roan."

Pat pointed out the three ponies to the Indian.

"Let see," he said.

The two Indian boys waiting, got the ponies out into the open.

The buckskin was a little bigger than most Indian ponies, and showed plainly the strain of Arab that ran to a greater or less degree in so many of the Indian horses of this country, coming right down from the earliest stock brought over from Spain. The buckskin's chest was wide and deep, his back was short, his legs were long and clean and powerful. He was too thin, but every Indian pony was thin. Pat looked at his teeth. He was six years old. His small unshod hoofs were sound. His ears and eyes were nervous.

"Try him," he told Darcy. "Right side, remember."

Darcy took the rawhide hackamore rope from the Indian, and without saddling, slipped onto the horse's back.

With a leap they were off across the hard open ground. A few bucks and the pony settled down, and in a few moments Sandy had him under control, and trotted back to the watching group.

"All right," he said, trying to keep his voice from betraying his enthusiasm.

Pat had been examining the roan and the tan. Neither animal was in a class with the buckskin stallion, but they weren't bad.

"That horse not bad," he said pointing to the stallion. "These horses——" He shrugged his shoulders. "Got another good horse?"

The old chief understood his meaning before the words were translated for him. He spoke to the boys, and one of them disappeared around the pueblo. A moment later he reappeared leading another buckskin stallion.

"Am I seein' double?" muttered Sandy, rubbing his eyes. "Where was he hidin' *this* one?"

Pat grinned. The two horses were almost identical except for a patch of white on the second buckskin's chest and a heavier mane.

"They brothers," explained the Indian. "Same mother. Same father. He not ridden long time."

The second stallion was a year younger, Pat read from his mouth, and, if anything, he was a better horse than his older brother. He shied away when Pat tried to mount him, and reared up almost pulling the hackamore rope out of his hand.

Pat talked to him softly, gentled him, ran his hand over his shoulder, edged around to the side, and with a sudden flying leap was over his back. Before he felt the buckskin under him, however, the horse had leaped forward and was headed for Santa Fé and all points south.

If Pat had had any idea of what that ride was going to

be like, he would have saddled. From a series of running bucks, the pony suddenly froze. He bogged his head and pitched.

Pat was raking him hard, and got him moving again. Crow hops aren't easy to take when you're bareback. The buckskin put Pat through six of them, one right after the other.

From shoulder to flank Pat gave him the spurs whenever he could risk taking his feet out from under his belly. Then at last, Pat felt that indescribable, surging sense of successful mastery, of a horse being his by right of conquest, and a few minutes later he swung him around and walked the panting animal back to the pueblo. The Indians had watched every detail of the exhibition, and their eyes betrayed a new respect for the white man as he slipped off the pony and faced them.

"Two horses, how much?" he said, still breathing hard.

The old chief muttered something.

"He say thirty dollars each," the interpreter announced.

Pat shook his head positively.

"American dollar two times as big as Mex dollar. Too much."

"Fine horse," the Indian protested.

"Not bad horse. Ten American dollars each. That same as twenty Mexican dollars."

After a good deal of bargaining, the price was settled at fifteen dollars a head, and the Indians were to keep the two travel worn Bar ES horses for the visitors until they called for them.

"Maybe you buy horses back in a few days when we come?" Pat suggested slyly as he counted out thirty dollars.

When the old chief heard that suggestion, he shook his head violently, so apparently he was not dissatisfied with the bargain he had driven.

Half an hour later, after another ceremonial smoke, Pat and Sandy started south on their fresh mounts. They rode

due west to the mesa, so as to avoid the town of Taos and the scattered settlement further south known as the Ranchos, and then cut back to the trail for Santa Fé.

"Where's your sheriff's badge?" demanded Sandy.

Pat looked down at his coat where he'd pinned it. Then he began to curse softly.

"Lost it?"

"Must've. Probably came off when I was wrastling with this bronc. Damn it to hell, Sandy. That's bad."

"What's the difference? You said yourself that down here, off your own range, being a Sheriff wouldn't mean anything."

Pat shook his head. "Even so, sometimes the federal people'll help you out. This is goin' to make it tough in Santa Fé if we do need help. We ain't neither of us got a thing to prove who we are."

"How about goin' back and tryin' to find the badge?"

Pat shook his head. "Lord only knows where it is.—Hell, Darcy, I've been usin' just a pair of hoglegs for a warrant most o' my life. I reckon we'll make out we're a posse, all right, but an outlaw posse now."

"How far's Santa Fé?"

" 'Bout seventy miles—and we got to make it by tomorrow. Somethin' tells me, Irish, that by tomorrow night we'll have a showdown for the whole jackpot."

11. "Things Happen Fast in Santa Fe"

They pushed on steadily through most of the night, and about ten o'clock the next morning caught their first glimpse of old Santa Fé.

In the sunlight the plaster of the adobe houses was the color of sunburned skin. Green plazas marked the center of the town, and the twin spires of the old Cathedral San Francisco rose like watchful sentinels over the picturesque Spanish town, while to the left, old Fort Marcy flapped its

defiant American flag. The Rio Santa Fé wound through the town like a ribbon of rust. The town itself was scattered out over the plain, that lay there almost completely surrounded by mountains.

"That's even prettier than I've been told," marveled Sandy.

"Hm-m," grunted Pat. *"Pretty?* It's more than that. Santa Fé's like nothin' you ever seen. Those old Spaniards knew more about puttin' up nice houses than any Yankee you ever met."

They rode on until they reached a cluster of houses on the outskirts north of the town.

"Pat! That there's a saloon, or I'm a greaser!"

"Well?"

"We're drinking, Pot Shot or no Pot Shot!" Darcy whooped. And before Pat could stop him, Sandy had spurred his horse across the road, thrown his reins over the hitching rack, and had disappeared through the doorway.

Pat followed and found Sandy at the bar.

"What'll you have?"

"Whiskey straight."

"Make it two," ordered Sandy. "Double 'em up."

Pat had looked around quickly as he entered the dive. At the bar a few feet away from Sandy there were three other customers, Mexicans.

The barkeeper was a breed. He looked at the two strangers curiously. Pat's comparatively small hat and their general outfits indicated that they were from the north.

"Howdy," he said as he served the drinks.

Pat nodded.

"This would be the worst rot-gut I've ever poured down my throat," observed Sandy cheerfully.

"What's wrong with it?" growled the barkeeper. "There's no better liquor in Santa Fé."

"Well, glad I am then that we won't be staying long,"

said Sandy fervently.

"Where you from?" demanded the barkeeper.

"Arizona," said Pat shortly.

The man looked sceptical. "Not stayin' long in Santa Fé, you said?"

"Maybe."

"Been here before?"

Pat nodded and decided he might as well ask some questions himself. "Sam Jeffries still around? He used to be Sheriff of Santa Fé."

"No, Sam Jeffries got shot three years ago. Touslin's Sheriff now."

"Touslin!" cried Sandy involuntarily. "Pot Shot Touslin?"

The barkeeper looked up quickly from the glass he was polishing. "No, not Pot Shot," he said. "His brother Tom Touslin. You know Pot Shot?"

"Just heard of him," muttered Sandy, pulling out some money. "Give us two more slugs of that red eye."

The group of Mexicans had been studying the two Americans, and talking among themselves in an undertone. They were quite drunk. One of them, a big burly gaucho, kept muttering something about gringos and throwing ugly glances at the strangers.

Pat paid no attention, knowing how strong racial feeling ran in this country, that only a few decades before had been Mexican territory. Trouble was always brewing just under the surface, and with an overwhelming Mexican population, white men who had important business of their own to pursue did not look for unnecessary trouble.

But Sandy began to get restless. "What's he saying about us?" he demanded aggressively.

"Nothing, kid, nothing," said Pat soothingly. "Let him be. We're not lookin' for trouble. We're on another trail."

Just at that moment, the big Mexican lurched toward Sandy, and kept right on coming until he was only two feet

away. Sandy faced him, grimfaced and tense.

"Gringo!" the man muttered contemptuously, and he spat square in the Irishman's face.

Darcy's fist came up from his waist, and the Mexican crumpled over as it found his chin.

There was a quick movement from one of the Mexicans and the flash of a knife. As Sandy dodged, his wrist snapped up, and with the roar of his Colt the knife-thrower toppled over. Pat was covering the third Mexican.

It was all over within three seconds, and then the barkeeper came up from behind the bar and surveyed the scene gloomily.

"There'll be hell to pay now," he growled. "This ain't quite the way to ride into Santa Fé, gents, if you're not lookin' for trouble. You can't go killin' folks in Santa Fé."

Pat was cursing under his breath. This incident was not the sort of publicity he was looking for.

"We've got to get out of here fast," he said in a low voice to Sandy. "Take that greaser's gun and knife away from him."

They backed out of the saloon, until they reached their horses, vaulted into the saddles and wheeled toward town. As they galloped down the dusty road, Pat glanced back over his shoulder and saw the barkeeper and the third Mexican in the doorway looking after them.

"That's hell," ground out Pat as he pulled his horse up. They were out of sight now. "Why couldn't you wait for a drink, you damn Irishman? Now we'll be in for it. You wait till Pot Shot and his brother hear that two strangers from up north have shot a Mexican. We're likely to swing ourselves."

"I'm sorry, Pat," Darcy cried contritely.

Pat thought rapidly. "Our only chance is to play possum and lie low. . . . We got to get rid of these horses. First thing they'll say about us is that we're ridin' two buckskins. What the hell do you do to get rid of two horses in a strange

town—if you're likely to need 'em again?"

"We just passed a shack and corral that looked deserted." Pat reined up.

"Might do. How far back?"

"Just about a hundred yards."

"Let's look. Make it fast."

Pat wheeled his horse in its tracks, and they raced back through their own cloud of dust. Following Sandy's arm, he swung in through a wide gateway of a high adobe wall and pulled the buckskin back on its haunches.

The corral was littered with refuse, and the adobe hut in the corner was obviously empty. The door was hanging by one leather hinge. A pile of straw and manure half blocked the low doorway.

Pat leaped off his horse, strode across the corral, and peered into the hut.

"Come on," he called. "All right if we can get 'em in. There's not much room."

Quickly they led their ponies into the hut. The door sill was so low that the ponies' heads had to go down. Inside there was scarcely room to unsaddle.

"Pull some of that straw in," Pat ordered. "It'll keep 'em from starving if we don't get back for a day or two—hey, leave that rifle there! You can't walk around Santa Fé totin' a Winchester without folks wonderin' what you're goin' to use it for."

"Hope these broncs don't kick each other to death," said Sandy.

They blocked the door to, piled some litter against it and kicked up the most obvious tracks in the corral. As they were making for the street, they heard the sound of a galloping horse.

Pat drew Darcy back behind the wall where they were shielded from the road, but where they could see who was passing. A man swept by at a dead run, low in the saddle, and they both recognized the Mexican they'd left behind

in the saloon a few minutes before.

"On the way to the Court House to report the shooting," said Pat grimly. "Well, we got to be able to find this hutch again. Take a look around. . . . Now for the center of town but from another direction."

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Pat. This is all my fault."

"All right, kid, I'd 'a done it if you hadn't. We're goin' to stay clear of the center of town for a while till we see where we are. And I reckon we'd better come in from the west. First thing you know, if we don't look out, we'll be on Grant Street and passin' the whole damn army."

"They got a lot of soldiers down here?"

"Enough. I don't know any of 'em, and I don't want to. They don't handle things my way."

They left the Oñaté trail, and Pat cut west through the fields to the southwest until they came to the railroad. They followed the tracks, crossing the Santa Fé River, and kept on until they came to Montezuma Avenue. Then they swung east toward the town.

"I ain't ever seen a city like this," marveled Sandy, his eyes taking in the winding narrow streets and the old adobe houses with their blue and green doorways. "It's plumb different."

"You've seen nothin' yet. Somehow, all these new houses and buildings the Americans have built don't seem right. The old Spanish and Mexican houses are different."

They were running into people now, chiefly native Mexicans, most of whom were either holding up a wall or wandering slowly along as though they weren't sure where to go. There were a few Indians who stalked solemnly about their business, and a very few whites. But no one paid any attention to the two northerners. In the heart of Santa Fé, strangers were a matter of course.

Under a big cottonwood tree, Pat halted and sat down cross-legged on the ground.

"Time's come to think."

He rolled a cigarette and smoked it slowly.

"One," he meditated aloud, "we got to get Pot Shot out of Santa Fé alive, and we got to get the bank money, too. Two, we're not only goin' to get no help from the Sheriff's office, but we're out of luck with the military and the U. S. Marshal 'cause we've got nothin' to prove who we are."

"Couldn't you telegraph?"

Pat shook his head. "I dont like much askin' for help unless I have to, and it would take too long. Red tape would tie things up for a week. Meanwhile someone would tip off Pot Shot and—— Anyhow, were in trouble already. You know, these hombres down here are downright ornery when it comes to anyone from Colorado, 'cause Colorado's a state and New Mexico ain't a state and wants to be."

"How about findin' Touslin, followin' him till he's alone, and takin' him in?"

"What about the money? He's not goin' to tell you where he's got it even if you ask him pretty as you please."

"Maybe he's banked it."

"No—gents like Pot Shot can't risk bankin' money—especially money they've stole. No, he's got it tucked away, and we got to get our hands on it *before* we go after Pot Shot. If we could find out where he lives——"

Pat sprang to his feet as a mestizo boy, ten or twelve years old, came sauntering down the street toward them.

"You speak American?" he demanded of the boy.

The boy looked at him curiously, and nodded.

"You know where Mr. Touslin lives; not the Sheriff, his brother, the one they call Pot Shot?"

"Palace Avenue," the boy said. "Beyond the Cathedral."

"Many houses out there? Will we find it all right?"

"You pay me, I show you."

"All right. Let's go."

They followed the boy up to College Street, crossed the river again, passed Bishop Lamy's famous garden, the Cathedral, and started east on Palace Avenue. Five min-

utes more, and the boy halted.

"There she is," he said, pointing ahead.

Pat gave him a dime.

Touslin's house was larger than most of the houses they'd passed, flat-roofed, one storey spreading out around a walled court. Flush on the street, the high sun-baked wall was broken by a huge gate wide enough for a coach to pass through. Behind the wall, the patio was surrounded on three sides by the house itself. The windows they could see were all narrow, with iron bars. An old Mexican woman was up on the flat terrace roof, hanging out clothes to dry in the sun.

"Quite a house," muttered Sandy.

"Yeah, and unless I'm all wrong the money we're lookin' for is inside. Ever robbed a house, Darcy?"

Sandy regarded the adobe wall dubiously. "Don't look too easy," he observed. "And probably Touslin and half a dozen Mexicans are inside."

"It's the only chance, 'cause we got to work fast. But we've got to get Touslin away first if he's there."

At that moment a horseman galloped up Palace Avenue from the center of town. Pat and Sandy drew back behind a wall as he approached. At Touslin's house, he pulled his horse up sharp, and riding up to the gate, pounded on it for admittance. A voice called out from within, and the horseman answered. A moment later the gate opened, and the Mexican disappeared from their sight.

"Strike you that greaser was in a hurry?" demanded Pat.

"Seemed that way."

"Reckon we'll wait here a bit and see."

They did not have to wait long. The big gate swung open, and Touslin himself rode out, followed by the Mexican who had arrived a few minutes before, and three more horsemen, all armed. They turned toward Santa Fé and rode off at a fast gallop.

"Now what do you make of *that?*" Pat mused. "Don't suppose that hombre who rode up came from his brother, bringin' news of two strangers from up north, do you, and that Pot Shot's goin' out to see for himself?"

"One thing, Pat, with those three gorillas ridin' out with him, there'll be three less inside to act as a reception committee."

"Right. The old woman's left the roof, ain't she?"

"Yeah."

"We got to get up on that roof. Let's cut around behind where there's less goin' on."

They made a wide circle around the adobe house. In the rear there was nothing but meadow land leading away to the river. But close to the house was a small cottonwood tree, and Pat eyed it speculatively.

"Mr. Darcy," he drawled, "can you climb trees? 'Cause unless you're crippled I don't see no reason for us not to elevate ourselves in that cottonwood, follow the big limb and drop down on Touslin's roof. There ain't even a window near-by for anyone to see us."

Five minutes later the pair were crouching on the roof.

"Just follow suit when I lead," whispered Pat. "No use tryin' to plan anything, 'cause we don't know what we're gettin' into."

From where they were they could see the ends of a ladder sticking up through a hole in the roof. Pat motioned to Darcy to follow, and crept forward on his hands and knees.

At first, peering cautiously through the hole in the roof, he could see nothing in the dim interior after the bright glare of the sun. Then he began to make things out. Below seemed to be a big storeroom. Barrels, crates and sacks were arranged all around the walls and almost filled the room. A rectangle of light indicated the door that led directly out into the patio. There was apparently no window.

Swiftly he swung onto the crude ladder and started down. He cursed under his breath as Sandy, right behind him,

stepped on his hand.

As his foot touched the clay floor, he whirled and looked around. Swiftly he glided over to the door, and peeked out. The patio was empty, except for an old Mexican grubbing about in a tiny flower garden and three small children playing with a mangy yellow puppy. The sound of a woman singing a Mexican song came from the room next door, which was probably the kitchen, Pat decided.

He could feel Sandy's breath on his neck.

"Easy does it," he whispered. "Cover me in back."

Whipping out his two Colts he stepped quietly into the patio and started toward the old man. The children saw him, and stopped playing suddenly, gazing at him in open mouthed wonder.

Sandy followed, watching the rooms behind and to the left.

The first suspicion the old Mexican had that anything unusual was happening was the cold muzzle of a Colt nestling into the small of his back.

"Callate la boca, amigo,"[1] said Pat quietly.

Automatically the man swung around. As he realized what was happening, the blood drained out of his face. What had been rich brown skin became a liverish yellow. The old man obviously was not armed.

At that moment, Pat heard two guns roar behind him one almost on top of the other. The song from the kitchen had suddenly stopped. There was complete silence, and then one of the children began to wail. A quick glance over his shoulder told Pat that Sandy was still on his feet. One of his forty-fours was smoking.

"All right?" Pat demanded.

"All right," Sandy answered. "That Mex in there was aimin' straight for you."

At that moment, a great fat Mexican woman burst out of the kitchen.

[1][Keep quiet, my friend.]

"Get over there by the kids," Sandy ordered.

She didn't understand his words, but his gesture was plain. She shuffled over to the group by the wall, her eyes terrified and her mouth working.

"Qué es eso, qué es eso?"[2] she kept muttering.

"Estáte quieto,"[3] Pat warned. "Watch 'em here," he said to Darcy. "I'll see who else is around."

He dove into the kitchen next to the granary through which they'd come. Empty. All these rooms opened on to the patio, he noticed, and didn't seem to connect with each other.

Just inside the doorway to the next compartment, he found the crumpled heap of a man, his gun still in his hand. He was a swarthy Mexican of about thirty-five, with a twisted, ugly face. Sandy had shot him through the heart. Rifles were stacked round the walls, and there were several crude bunks crowded together. It was apparently a sort of circle for Touslin's gang of men.

As Pat turned toward the patio again he heard a movement behind him, and instinctively ducked. As he whirled back toward the room, a bullet scorched through his shirt under the arm. The head and shoulders of a man were coming up from behind the bunk in the corner. His second shot and Pat's gun belched at the same instant, and the Mexican's revolver clattered to the dirt floor, his wrist shattered.

"Come out of there," Pat snarled. "Vamoose."

As the man staggered to his feet, and Pat jumped toward him, the man's one good arm automatically went up over his head.

Stevens' hand darted under his arm and then behind his shoulder for a knife. But, curiously, the greaser wasn't carrying one.

"Out there—patio," Pat ordered, pushing his captive through the doorway.

[2][What is it? What is it?] [3][Be quiet.]

"Here's another for you, Sandy," he called, as he drove into the next room.

From there on, the house was deserted. Pat searched every room, his eyes sweeping over the details of each chamber as he progressed.

In the patio, Sandy stood before his prisoners, both guns ready. The old man was crouching on the ground, too terrified to stand. The fat cook was hovering over the two children protectingly, her eyes now full of defiance and hate. Pat's last captive was examining his wrist, and trying to wrap it up in a handkerchief with his good hand.

"To the left of where we came in there's a black hole of a room without a corridor. Push 'em in there, and we'll lock 'em up."

They herded their prisoners into the empty cell-like chamber, and closed the heavy oak door behind them. Pat dropped a heavy bar into place.

"Will they be all right?" Sandy asked anxiously. "After all, these walls are just adobe mud. It'd be easy to smash——"

"They're almost three foot thick," said Pat. "And if they try breaking down the door, we'll hear 'em. Now let's get goin' fast. Come on."

He led the way to a big room in the south wing that he had decided was Pot Shot's bedroom, and pointed out a great black iron chest in the corner.

"Maybe it's there. Maybe it's not," he said grimly.

Sandy was examining the chest. It was almost three feet long and two feet wide, and seemed to be made of wide strips of iron or steel woven together like a basket, riveted, and welded. He grasped one of the big swinging handles at the end and tried to lift the chest but could not budge it from the earthen floor. A three-inch keyhole showed in the front.

"Gosh, I hope it'll not be in there," Sandy muttered.

" 'Cause we're not goin' to get it out if it is."

"It's the most likely spot in the whole house," Pat said. "I looked everything over as I went through. It's an old Spanish chest. I saw one once up north."

"I'd rather be asked to crack the Denver mint!" said Sandy, examining the keyhole.

"Don't pay no attention to that keyhole," Pat said, running his hand over the top of the chest. "On the one I saw it was just a fake. The real keyhole was up here on top, hidden by one of these lugs that swung around on a pivot."

"You're right!" cried Sandy excitedly, peering into the keyhole on the front. "This is all rusty and dirty inside. It's not been used for years."

"You tear this place apart and see if you can find a big key anywhere, while I find the real keyhole," Pat ordered. "Yes, by God, here it is! Just like the one I saw!"

With his knife he had pried up the end of one of the small rectangular lugs in the top of the chest. Held down in position by a spring, it swung around, revealing the secret keyhole.

"Now we got to find that key!"

Systematically the two men started searching the room. The floor was of hard beaten earth. The thick, solid walls were lined with yellow and red striped calico cloth up to a height of about five feet, with smooth gypsum white above that came off when you touched it. The ceiling was ribbed with untrimmed but painted beams about two feet apart, supporting a solid ceiling of saplings laid close one to another and running in the opposite direction. There were two narrow barred windows. A high, beautifully carved wooden bed piled with dirty blankets, two crude hand hewn chairs, and a big wooden clothes press in the corner made up the furnishings of the room.

It took less than ten minutes to cover the room, and then Pat and Sandy faced each other gloomily.

The bed had been torn to pieces. The clothes press had been emptied and thoroughly searched. All the ceiling rafters had been proved solid. The hard earthen floor showed no signs of ever having been disturbed.

"Maybe it'll be in some other room," suggested Sandy.

"Go out and take a look at those prisoners and see if they're happy," said Pat absently, "while I think."

When Sandy returned a minute later, he found Pat bending over the chest again. His shoulders were tense, and his hands were wrenching at something. Then he slowly raised the top of the chest.

"Where—what in——" Sandy burst out.

Pat faced him with a grin, and pointed to the wall behind the bed which he had dragged out into the center of the room.

"I don't see——"

"Hole in the adobe wall behind the calico," Pat explained briefly. "Calico slit right down with the stripes so's it wouldn't show, and hangin' like a curtain on a piece of tin to keep it straight."

"I'll be damned——"

Both men were bending over the open chest. Right on top lay a pair of worn leather saddle bags. Pat ripped open one of the pouches, and pulled out a flat, rectangular bundle tied up in slicker cloth.

"Believe we've got it," he muttered as he tore it open. "Yes! By God, and he ain't even unpacked 'em yet," he cried triumphantly as he riffled over the bills.

The saddle bags yielded eight more flat oblong packages.

"That must be the lot," said Sandy. "Eighteen thousand dollars! My God.—Now what else is there in that chest?"

"Nothing for us," snapped Pat, dropping down the lid. The iron bolts grated as he turned the great key.

"What the——" Sandy began to protest.

"You're *with* the law, even if you are bein' hunted as a

murderer. This is ours, and we take it, but——"

"Some damn thievin' greaser'll just——"

Pat shook his head. "No, Pot Shot's the only one who knows what's in that chest. We're goin' to collect him. And we'll take this here key with us for the time bein' so's no one else'll get in. It'd take dynamite to open that chest without the key. . . . Push that bed back into place and then let's make tracks."

"How you goin' to carry those packages of bills?"

Pat did not answer. He was already on his way to the granary. Picking up a half-empty sack of corn, he emptied out all but a half-bushel of the grain. Then he stuffed the packages of money down into the corn, and picked up the sack.

"Seems to me I recollect in the Bible someone hiding money like this," he grinned. "Anyhow, this here's food for our horses. What was happening to those Mexicans when you looked?"

"Cursin' and wailin'. They're safe for a while."

"All right, come on. We'll mosey out the same way we came in."

Up the ladder, over the roof, down the cottonwood, and two minutes later they were walking swiftly back toward town.

"Now for Pot Shot," Pat grinned. "He's all we need."

"How you goin' to——"

"We'll find him first, and then see."

"We never can——"

"The hell we can't," snapped Pat, cutting him off. "But you better take that empty shell out of your gun. You may need all the lead you got before we're through."

"We've been right busy since we've hit this town," reflected Sandy as he loaded the empty chamber of his Colt.

"Yeah, things happen fast in Santa Fé," said Pat grimly. "They always have."

12. "This Rope'll Be Right Handy for the Lynching"

Say, Pat, this seems loco to me," observed Sandy as they walked down Palace Avenue. "Why wouldn't we be waiting out at Pot Shot's house until he comes back and then throw him?"

"Can't tell you," grinned Pat, "except that's what any sensible person would do, and I've never seen anyone get what he wanted by bein' sensible."

Pat was all but swaggering. There was a reckless, gambling light in his eyes. It was almost as if the recovery of the bank money had gone to his head.

"What *are* you goin' to do?" asked Sandy warily.

"I told you, Irish—find the son of a —— and take him back to Dutch Springs."

"Sort of careless, wouldn't we be, walking down into town like this?"

"Who'll recognize us? That one greaser you forgot to shoot out in the saloon is the only man in town who's ever seen us before."

"How about the crew we've just left behind us?"

"They won't be botherin' us or no one else for a time."

Pat headed straight down into town, past the old Spanish Governor's Palace.

In the early eighties, in spite of the enthusiastic invasion of adventurous Yankees. Sante Fé was still a Mexican town. Less than four decades had passed since the American flag had been first planted there by General Kearney; less than a decade since any real development had begun, for those earliest years had been absorbed by the constant struggle against the rebellious Indians and intriguing Mexicans; less than four years since the first railroad train had smoked in from the civilized east.

Here and there were modern American buildings, such as the Palace Hotel, and the brand new two-storey Spiegelberg Block that housed, all together, the Second National

Bank, the famous Hickox & Company, and the Filigree Palace. There was talk of a new State Capitol building and a penitentiary. A few of the most prominent citizens, such as Abraham Staab, ex-Governor William G. Ritch, and General G. A. Smith lived in houses that might have graced the Boston Back Bay section. There was a military reservation, the beginning of a "university." There were new Protestant churches of every denomination, struggling for survival and converts from the dominatingly Catholic population. A hideous Soldiers' Monument had been erected to deface the old Plaza where the great trees had stood for centuries like lazy sentinels guarding the Spanish Palace.

Dominating the town, however, was the spirit of the old days. The great Archbishop Lamy was still alive; and from his Cathedral and his garden ruled over the spiritual life of the whole territory. The dusty, dry Santa Fé Trail still wound in past the old fonda and trading houses that lined the streets, the trading houses that had made so much of the early history of this frontier. There were still more burros plodding along under their heavy loads of wood than there were fashionably clad ladies bearing parasols; more creaking oxcarts covered with muck than there were fine carriages gleaming with varnish. With Indians and Mexicans lounging against every sunny wall, you saw ten brown faces for every white one. And adobe and plaster still stood triumphantly defiant before the invasion of the shining American brick and newly painted frame houses that were springing up everywhere.

"You see that building?" Pat demanded, pointing at the old Governor's Palace. "There's been lots of history made in there."

"It's the future I'll be interested in, not the past," muttered Sandy, looking around uneasily.

"We'll get the layout of this town first," decided Pat. "Just in case we want to go somewhere in a hurry. It's built up a lot since I was here. But keep your eyes peeled for

what we're lookin' for."

For half an hour they wove their way in and out among the narrow, winding streets. There were few people about, for it was the hour of the siesta. In front of the new and magnificent three-storey Palace Hotel, Pat stopped thoughtfully.

"That's by right where we ought to be stoppin' Sandy," he said. "Look at that tower! I've not seen anything like that outside of Denver. The Americans sure are movin' into New Mexico now that they got a railroad."

"What is it, the Denver and Rio Grande?"

"No, the Atchison. The D. & R. G. just runs down to Española—about twenty-five or thirty miles north of here, just the other side of the Rio Grande."

"How in hell do you know so much?" marveled Sandy.

"I read the newspapers," retorted Pat. "Say, by God, that's an idea, though, Sandy Darcy!"

"What?"

"Maybe the taxpayers of Dutch Springs would like to pay our train fare north!"

"It will be no less than a private car you'll be ordering out for us, I suppose," Sandy grinned. "And now, if you're through with your sightseeing, could I interest you in looking for a gentleman known as Pot Shot Touslin?"

"That's an idea. But, somehow, Sandy, there don't seem to me to be so much of a hurry now——"

Sandy looked at him in amazement.

"But you said——"

"Yeah, I know. But my left palm's started to itch, an' when that happens it means 'go slow.' "

Darcy snorted.

"Besides, in a couple of hours or so there'll be a fine band concert in the Plaza."

"How the hell do you know *that?*" Sandy exploded.

"I'm tellin' you, these Santa Fé people get a lot about themselves in the papers. The Denver Post——"

"And I suppose we can't miss the band concert!"

"No-o-o, we can't, Sandy. You see, most folks turn up at the Plaza for the band concert, and——"

"You want to shoot it out with the *whole* town?"

"And we might see Touslin, and follow him off," went on Pat unperturbed. "Let's get a drink and think about it."

He led they way back to a big saloon he'd noticed the other side of the Plaza. It was called the Montezuma. Just inside the door, he stopped short.

"Sandy, my lad, is that a roulette wheel I see?" he asked softly. "Somehow, I fancy my luck today."

There were five or six Mexicans around the green table, but the pale-faced croupier spinning the wheel was watching them place their small bets without much interest, for it was too early for any real business.

Pat strolled over to the table, and put five silver dollars on the number thirteen. The croupier straightened up and opened his eyes. He looked at Pat curiously, as he spun the wheel and twisted his ivory ball off in the opposite direction.

When the wheel slowed down, the ivory ball had nestled down at thirteen.

Pat picked up his hundred and eighty dollars, and moved on to the bar.

"The drinks are on me," he grinned, "and we'll buy cigars."

Three whiskeys later, he turned his glass upside down on the long bar.

"That'll be about enough," he decided judiciously. "This ain't the day for our hands to be in any doubt about where they're goin'."

Pat's careless manner of the last hour or so would have deceived anyone who had not been watching him carefully. On the streets, his keen, wary gray eyes had caught every movement everywhere. In the Montezuma, his back was to the bar, and he never took his eyes off the door. That door was opening more and more frequently now, for

Santa Fé was waking up.

"You know, Sandy," Pat went on, "the more I think of it, the better the idea seems to me of goin' back to that Palace Hotel and buying a room."

"What do you want a room for?"

"Well, a room's always a nice thing to have in a strange town. Makes you feel as though you belonged. Besides, from that there tower on the hotel—and I reckon a man could get up there all right—you could see most of what was goin' on in this part of town. You can see the Plaza, Palace Avenue, everything. It'd be right hard for a man to move around much in this town and not be seen from that tower, unless he kept mighty close to his walls—and hard to be leaving town," he added significantly.

And so, by five o'clock, Sandy and Pat found themselves up in the cupola of the Palace, overlooking Santa Fé. Except for the spires of the Cathedral, and three or four church steeples, there was nothing higher in town. Pat was draped over the railing on the little balcony outside the south window. Sandy was wandering back and forth between the east and west balconies.

The leisurely, sun-baked life of the old town went on below them: fat, brown children played all over the streets; burros loaded with wood and grain and other produce plodded slowly in from the near-by hills and fields; over at the reservation a few soldiers were drilling on the dusty parade ground; shopkeepers lounged in their red and green and blue painted doorways, chatting with each other across the narrow street in a desultory way, and, apparently, reluctant to withdraw out of the pleasant sun even to wait on the occasional customer who entered their shops; the Plaza was spotted with idlers, and the long covered walk running along as a facade to the old government palace was blocked here and there by talking groups. Occasionally a horse clattered along one of the narrow streets, and Pat watched the hotel omnibus rattle off to the station when

way down the valley the incoming train whistled for attention.

And with that whistle began a perceptible movement throughout the town, as those who had nothing better to do turned toward the railway station, for what was, next to the military band concert, the most important event of the day.

"Where in hell do you suppose that son of a —— went?" demanded Pat at last. "Rides into town with three of his gunmen and he hasn't been around none that I can see."

"Maybe he's cut for it."

"And left that money?" Pat scoffed.

They watched the train pull out of the south and, with the engine's big bellied stack belching black smoke, snort its way up the valley and east across the flats on the tracks they'd followed on foot that morning.

"Mebbe Pot Shot knows what happened out Palace Avenue way," Sandy offered tentatively.

Pat did not answer. Idly curious, he was watching a figure crossing the Plaza. The man was in a hurry, which explained Pat's interest, for people usually had plenty of time in Santa Fé. He had a sheaf of white paper in his hand. He halted outside the old Palace and pasted up one of the white papers on a pillar by the center door. Then he made for the postoffice and posted up another bill. He put up another in front of the bank, another in front of the Montezuma Saloon, and so on throughout the town in half-a-dozen more obvious places. Then, empty handed, the necessity for haste over, he returned to the old Palace and disappeared within.

People were drifting back to the Plaza now. Pat looked at the sky, still bright from the sun which already had dropped behind the hills to the west, and then stretched.

"Darcy, we better eat," he decided. "After we eat, we'll come up here again till it gets dark."

They made their way down to the dining room and chose a table in the far corner facing the door.

"We're in a hurry," Pat told the shifty-eyed Mexican girl who appeared to take their order. "Bring us whatever the cook's got ready, but lots of it."

They gulped a hasty meal, and washed it down with coffee.

By the time they had climbed the stairs again up to their watchtower, the Plaza was crowded with people who had turned up for the concert. The military band was already in the bandstand, tuning up. The bright glare of day was softening into dusk.

"In another half hour, we're not goin' to see much from up here," Pat growled.

At that moment Sandy saw his companion grow suddenly tense, his eyes narrowing as he concentrated on something that interested him in the street. Sandy followed his gaze, and raked the street for some sign of a figure that might be Touslin, but there was no one there answering the description.

"Sandy," said Pat, as though he hardly dared put his own thoughts into words, "you see that tall hombre standing in front of the feed store readin' the poster stuck up there on the wall?"

Darcy nodded. "The one danglin' a rifle the way you said we couldn't in Santa Fé?"

"Yeah. Ever seen him before?"

"How the hell can I tell from here without seein' his face?"

"I ain't seen his face either, but I seen him walk along the street."

"Well?"

"And only one man in these United States walks like that."

"He's got a small hat," observed Sandy. "Must be from

up——"

"It's Ezra!"

"You're crazy."

"It's Ezra, I'm tellin' you."

"But how the hell——"

"I know. At first I didn't believe my eyes. Then I saw him twistin' his head from side to side like Ezra does to see all around with that one eye of his, and I was sure. Sandy, I'll watch him from here so's we don't lose him. You go down and get him, and bring him up to the room where we can talk. I'll go down there soon as I see you tie on to him."

Still half in doubt, Sandy departed swiftly, and made for the feed store. As he turned the corner, he saw the figure that Pat thought was Ezra still standing there studying the white poster. As he approached, he caught a glimpse of red hair under the old sombrero that was pulled far down on the man's head.

It was Ezra.

Darcy came up quietly behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"It's pretty far from home you are, stranger."

Ezra turned and regarded Sandy gloomily. His face showed neither surprise nor enthusiasm.

"For God's sake, how did you come here?" burst out Sandy.

"Train," Ezra croaked.

"How did you know we were in Santa Fé?"

"I didn't—until I hit town. I just guessed you might be. But I knew you was here five minutes after the train pulled in."

"How?"

With a pained and disgusted look in his eyes. Ezra turned back to the poster he'd been reading. Following his gaze, Sandy read:

$200 REWARD
For the Capture of
TWO UNKNOWN
OUTLAWS ANSWERING
THE FOLLOWING DESCRIPTION

Sandy, his heart beating, skipped the small type description of the clothes and general appearance of the two outlaws, and went on to the rest of the notice.

WANTED FOR ROBBERY AND MURDER!
LAST SEEN IN THE CITY OF SANTA FE TODAY
T. R. TOUSLIN, *Sheriff of Santa Fé County*

"You and Pat been runnin' right true to form," muttered Ezra. "If I'd a known what I was gettin' into, I sure never would have come down here. Why the hell——"

"Come on," said Sandy. "We better get back to Pat. He's at the hotel waitin'."

Ezra nodded. "Suits me," he said dryly. "Sooner we get out of sight the better. I sure don't like to be seen around on the street with anyone answerin' that description the way you do."

They walked quickly back to the Palace, and went around to the back door. Pat's room was on the second floor, and as they approached, he waved at them from the wide balcony that circled the second story of the hotel over the regular piazza.

Once in the bedroom, Ezra turned and carefully locked the door. Then he looked at Pat Stevens commiseratingly.

"How are you, Wall Eyed?" Pat grinned. "Took the train down here for a spell away from the ranch? Nice country, New Mexico."

"Sam said I had to come," Ezra explained coldly. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Maybe it's lucky I came, though, 'cause now I can turn you in, instead of the first greaser that sees you when you stick your nose out of this here room, and we'll have two hundred dollars to hire a lawyer

—not that a lawyer'll be of any use in the fix *you're* in," he added.

"It's a reward notice they have up for us," explained Sandy.

"So-o-o. That what you were readin', Ezra?"

The big man nodded sourly.

"I *wondered* what that hombre was puttin' up around town in such a hurry, but I never guessed it was about us." Pat looked thoughtful. "That sort of changes things, with lots of folks knowin' about things."

"Lots of folks knew about things before that notice went up," said Ezra grimly. "'Fore I'd crossed the station platform, I heard about everything there is to know. Them in the saloon on the way up——"

"People talkin'?"

Ezra nodded. "And pretty excited."

"What they sayin'?"

"Two outlaws from up north, shootin' up a saloon, murderin' a poor defenseless Mexican, breakin' into a house belongin' to one of Santa Fé's prominent citizens, and robbin'——"

"So they know about that," broke in Pat.

"——and robbin' him of everything he's got, after murderin' two of his servants and rapin' his Mexican cook."

Pat turned to Sandy with mock horror.

"Was *that* what you was doin' while I——"

"Go to hell," retorted Sandy.

"It ain't no joke," muttered Ezra. "With folks feelin' like they do, you'll be damn lucky if you make jail without bein' lynched. An' there's talk of goin' to the General and gettin' some cavalry out after you if yuh're not captured before morning. Why the hell couldn't you have gone right to the U. S. Marshal or the Governor, told him who you was, and what you wanted——"

Pat looked at Ezra pityingly. "You poor, ignorant sourbelly, who the hell down here in New Mexico would give a

damn about the Sheriff of Dutch Springs, Colorado—even if they took his word for the fact that he was Sheriff? And how the hell do you think we'd ever get Touslin back into Colorado without takin' him back ourselves? Ain't you never heard about state lines and extradition warrants? And you can't get an extradition warrant unless you can prove something. 'Mr. Governor, I'm the Sheriff from Dutch Springs, Colorado. I ain't got no papers to prove it, but I'm he. We sort of suspect one of your best-known citizens of bank robbery up north, and we'd like to take him back up there and hang him.' . . . You damn fool, you can try that line of palaver if you want, but I'm wastin' no time on it."

"Then we better try to get out of this fast," muttered Ezra.

"Just as fast as we can," agreed Pat grimly, "*but* takin' our man with us. Even if every lousy trooper in New Mexico's strung across the border to keep us from crossing and every dirty greaser's on our trail raisin' the dust behind, we're leavin' Santa Fé with Pot Shot Touslin, and we're takin' him north with us all the way."

Ezra sat down on the bed and wiped his forehead.

"If that's how you feel about it, I'm takin' the train back tomorrow—alone," he announced. "I ain't goin' to——"

"How you goin' to do it?" demanded Sandy. "We got only two horses, even if we can get to 'em. We ain't even seen Pot Shot. And——"

"How the hell should I know how I'm goin' to do it?" Pat snapped. "I've filled inside straights before, and I can do it again. The first thing is to find Touslin. Ezra, you get off that bed and get goin'. You're goin' to find Touslin and find him quick. Sandy and I'll just hang around here and listen to the band concert, see?"

"How'm I goin' to find Touslin?"

"You know what he looks like, don't you? And he's in Santa Fé, sure. You're goin' to go through this town with a

fine tooth comb and you're goin' to keep goin' till you find him. Wait'll he looks as though he's settled down somewhere for a time, then come back here. We'll be waitin'."

"Then what?" Ezra demanded bleakly.

Pat did not answer. He was thinking.

"But first, you buy some rope—lots of it. Enough for about four regular cow ropes, and some short tie ropes. Bring it back here right away. Now roll off."

"What do you want so much rope for?" asked Sandy curiously as Ezra departed.

"Rope's a mighty handy thing," Pat grinned evasively. "Never have seen a time when rope didn't come in handy, and maybe New Mexico rope is better'n we have up north."

In fifteen minutes Ezra was back, and threw the armful of rope down on the floor.

"Don't sit down, Ezra, don't sit down," Pat said, holding the door open. "You're goin' right out again, and remember, don't come back till you've got that greaser spotted. And don't waste none of our time hangin' around the Plaza listenin' to the band, 'cause Sandy and me, we don't like waitin'."

It was past midnight when Ezra reappeared.

"Find him?" demanded Pat in a tense voice.

Ezra nodded wearily.

"I been followin' him around for half an hour," he muttered.

"Where is he?"

"I left him sittin' over in the Sheriff's office, with his brother, and four deputies. I watched 'em through the window, and I could hear 'em talkin'. I reckon they'll be there some time, 'cause they're drinkin'."

"What are they talkin' about?"

"Arguin' about callin' for troops to capture you and Sandy," replied Ezra grimly. "Pot Shot wants the troops called out. His brother, the Sheriff, don't want to admit

he and his deputies can't find you without federal help."

"What makes 'em think we're still in town?"

"They've had posses out all day in ever direction around the country and no one's seen you and they can't find no likely tracks. Besides, they found two ponies and all your stuff in a shack just out of town, and they're sure the horses are the ones you was ridin' when you hit that saloon."

"Damn!" cried Sandy. "Our rifles, and everything."

Ezra looked at Darcy reflectively. "You probably ain't goin' to need 'em no more," he observed. "So it don't matter much."

Pat picked up the rope, which he had cut into two long lengths and a number of short tie ropes.

"Put two of these tie ropes inside your shirt, Sandy," he commanded crisply, "and get ready. You and I are goin' out."

He disappeared through the window onto the balcony with the long ropes in his hand. In a few moments he was back at the window.

"Ezra, come out here."

Darcy buckled on his guns, fixed them low, and was tying them down when Pat and Ezra reentered the room.

"Ezra's stayin' here," Pat announced. "Come on, kid, you and me are goin' to get Pot Shot."

"This here rope you bought'll be right handy for the lynching," Ezra called out after them.

13. "Just Rode Down to Collect That Po'Cat"

Except for an eddy of life and noise around the saloons and dance halls they passed, Pat and Sandy found the streets almost deserted.

Pat headed straight for the Sheriff's office which was in a new one-storey building behind the old Palace. It took but three minutes to reach it from the hotel.

Sandy looked at Pat aghast when he realized just where

they were.

"You won't be trying to pull anything while he's in *there,* will you?" he whispered.

"Think of any less likely place for a hold-up than a Sheriff's office?" chuckled Pat.

The gambling, reckless light had come back into his eyes. "No, I sure can't."

"That's the answer. If you surprise folks *enough,* you got 'em half-licked before you start."

From where they were, across the street from Sheriff Touslin's office, they could see light and the figures of several men through the small barred window. The door to the building itself apparently opened into a center hallway, which in turn opened into the room where Touslin and his companions were sitting.

"You stay here. I want to see if there's a back door to this shebang."

And Pat disappeared into the dark shadows at the side of the building. In half a minute he was back.

"Nothin' back there but some barred cell windows," he announced in a low voice. "We'll have to do everything from the front door. Now, listen, kid. This may be tough. It may be easy. You cut over to that window and lie low unless something starts. I'm goin' in after Pot Shot."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. I want you coverin' me from the window. Watch everything you can from outside, and crack down fast if anyone makes a move that looks bad. I can watch six of 'em pretty well, but you never can tell. Don't shoot to kill if you can help it, but don't let things get too hot. If I want you inside later, I'll call you. If I get Touslin out alone, keep 'em covered inside till I give you the high sign. Got it?"

"Let me go in with you, Pat. Two's better than one."

Pat shook his head. "I don't trust my luck if I don't play things my way. If I walk in alone, they're so surprised that

I got ten seconds to get my saddle cinched. If two strangers walk in on 'em, some fool will go for his gun pronto, and hell will bust loose. The minute that happens we're finished."

Side by side they crossed the street and cautiously peered in the window. Six men sat there. Pot Shot had his back to the window and they couldn't see his face. The Sheriff was facing him across a big pine table. Two Mexicans slouched over the table beside the Sheriff. One more was poking up a small iron stove in the corner, for the night was chilly. The fourth Mexican was out of range of the window. No one that they could see was facing the door.

Pat slipped away, leaving Sandy by the window. Cautiously he turned the knob, opened the door, and disappeared into the dark hallway.

Tense with excitement, but with his mind working coolly, Sandy kept one eye on the men before him, and one eye on the door into the hall. Both guns were in his hands.

He imagined he could see the knob of the door turning. Then the door opened, slowly, quietly, almost as though there were a soft wind behind it. The door itself was between him and the doorway, so for the moment he could see nothing more. But it kept on swinging open, and as it was pushed back toward the wall, he saw Pat standing there, nonchalant, his hands hanging easily at his sides, both his Colts still holstered. Sandy was so surprised that he almost cried out. Pat had the manner of one paying a social call. Only his narrowed, alert gray eyes betrayed the fact that something important was happening. And apparently no one in the room had noticed him.

"Evenin', Sheriff," he said finally in a quiet voice.

Sheriff Touslin's head jerked around.

"What do you want?" he asked sharply.

"Just wanted to have a chat with you," Pat said easily. "I'm payin' sort of an official call."

"Who are you?"

"'Fore I tell you," drawled Pat, "I just wanted to advise you all to keep your hands right on the table where they are. You're covered from the window. And you in the corner, you might raise *your* hands up above your head. . . . Sheriff, if there's any of these greasers who don't talk English, it might save some trouble if you told 'em what I said."

"What the hell is this?" Touslin blurted out. "Are you——"

"You! Pot Shot! Take it easy!" Pat ground out in a cold, deadly voice. "If you move your hands again, I'll drill you before you even smell your guns."

"This is one of the sons of a —— we're lookin' for, Tom," yelled Pot Shot. "Why don't yuh——"

Sheriff Touslin had begun to recover from his surprise, and his face was livid with fury. His hands stayed where they were on the table in front of him, but his fingers were twitching nervously.

"I've *heard* you was lookin' for me," Pat admitted. "That's one reason I dropped in."

The Sheriff could contain himself no longer, and exploded.

"You dare to walk into my office and hold up——"

"I've come to see you about a prisoner," Pat broke in crisply. "What's this about a hold-up? I ain't even got my guns out."

"What prisoner?"

With his head Pat motioned toward Pot Shot. "There, across the table from you."

Sandy would have given a lot to see Pot Shot's face at that moment. There was a deathly silence in the room.

"I reckon you must have heard about him robbin' a bank up north and murderin' the teller," Pat went on in a friendly tone. "And I'm mighty glad you caught him for me. I'm the Sheriff from up there, by the way. My name is—— Well, that's not important. I just rode to collect that po'cat."

Sandy noticed that Pat had not mentioned Dutch Springs

by name.

"You're a damn liar!"

Pat ignored the remark. "And a couple of days later he murdered an old trapper up in the hills. But you wouldn't have heard about that, of course."

"Is this a bluff?" raged Sheriff Touslin.

"Even if you think it is, I wouldn't try to call it," advised Pat softly.

Without any warning Sandy saw Pot Shot's two hands drop for his guns. Pat's hands streaked down at the same instant and his two guns came up, flashing. Both the outlaw's guns clattered to the floor, and he looked down in blank surprise. He'd been shot through both forearms before he had even fired, and his hands hung there useless.

Pat dropped his smoking Colts back into their holsters.

"That was what I asked you particularly *not* to do," he said mildly.

Sheriff Touslin was muttering under his breath.

"That's my brother!" he burst out automatically.

"I wouldn't tell folks about it, if I was you," Pat said soberly. "Of course, you're a double-crossin', thievin' son of a —— *yourself,* Sheriff, but you couldn't be the yellow-bellied, poisonous snake that Pot Shot is."

"You'll swing for this," Sheriff Touslin threatened, his face working.

Pat ignored that remark too.

"What I wanted to see you about was to ask you to turn this murderer over to me and let me take him along north so's we can hang him without botherin' with extradition papers. Otherwise I'll just have to take him off your hands without."

"You'll never get out of Santa Fé alive!" Sheriff Touslin said with grim satisfaction. "I've got thirty men patrolling the roads and trails out of town."

Pat sighed. "I hoped you'd see it my way," he said. "But I suppose—— Now, there's just a couple of more things

before Pot Shot and me mosey along. That Mexican who got shot north of here this mornin' drew a knife first, and got just what was comin' to him. As for the robbery out Palace Avenue way, that wasn't no robbery. We was just collectin' stolen goods. And the poor hombre who got shot just didn't know any better than to resist the law. So you'd better take down those damn fool posters of yours. I'm takin' one of 'em back to my wife as a souvenir, by the way—maybe you'd like to autograph it," he added insultingly.

A narrow scar across the Sheriff's forehead got very white.

"Tom, yuh goin' to let him get away with this?" Pot Shot snarled. "Ain't any of yuh got guts enough to back him down?"

"That bastard outside the window, he got us covered cold," muttered one of the deputies.

"And yuh see what happened to you," chimed in another.

"Yuh're yellow, all of yuh! I wish to hell I could move my fingers, I'd show——"

"Pot Shot, are you comin' along peaceful?" demanded Pat, "or shall I knock you over the head with a gun and carry you out?"

"Tom, yuh goin' to let him take me out o' here?" the squat little man cried, terrified now. "He'll shoot me soon as he gets me away!"

"Shucks, no, Touslin, I wouldn't shoot you for the world. You're goin' back north, have a regular trial and be hanged by the neck until——"

"I'll make a deal with yuh," Sheriff Touslin said slowly. "You'll never make the state line. I'll have the troopers out after you ten minutes after you leave this office, and you'll be hanged yuhrself. Leave my brother here, and I'll give you six hours to make a getaway."

"You're scum, Touslin, just scum. I'll bet you a hundred dollars against that tin star of yours I make the border *and* Pot Shot'll cross it ahead of me. I may have only a outlaw posse, but we mean business. . . . You won't take

me, eh? Well, Pot Shot, which is it to be? You walkin' out of here, or goin' out feet first?"

Touslin sat in grim silence.

Pat regarded him quizzically for a moment, then pulled out his gun, covered the group, and turned toward the window.

"Sandy, come on in," he called. "I got 'em covered."

A moment later the big figure of Sandy Darcy filled the doorway.

"Sandy, I know you won't like to do it, 'cause he's been shot up some, but you'll have to tap Pot Shot on the chin. It's time for him to go home, and he don't want to go."

Darcy's chin squared as he approached the outlaw.

"You know who it was you shot in the back up north, you coyote? That was my brother. Now, you'll take it."

His fist came up almost from his knee and caught Pot Shot under the jaw. The man's head snapped back, and he collapsed over the table.

"Tie him up good and gag him," ordered Pat.

In grim silence they all watched Sandy truss up Touslin's legs and hands.

"Now, Sandy, my lad, take over here and entertain these gents till I get back."

Pat leaned over, lifted up the hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight, flung it over his shoulder, and stalked out of the door without another word.

In ten minutes he was back. He entered, whistling softly, a coil of rope over his arm.

"Now we'll tie 'em all up, gag 'em, and leave 'em here," he announced blithely. "There's not one of them don't deserve hangin', but maybe they like vermin down here in New Mexico, and we don't *know* that they ever crawl up into America. Get goin', kid, get goin'."

"By God, you're goin' to pay for this. You're a fool to think you can get away."

"Hush up, Touslin," Pat yawned. "I'm tired o' listenin'

to you."

A quarter of an hour later, the two men were on the way back to the hotel.

"What'd you do with Pot Shot?" Sandy demanded as soon as they reached the street.

Pat chuckled. "Hauled him up to the hotel balcony, and he's goin' to sleep on the floor with Ezra, while you and I sleep in the bed."

"But, my God, Pat, ain't we hightailin' it right off tonight?"

"No, we're goin' to get some sleep, I'm tellin' you."

"But how will you be getting out of town by daylight—and with Pot Shot? By mornin,' someone will have found the Sheriff and——"

"Yeah, I know. Ez won't think much of my idea either," said Pat indifferently. "You and he can have a good time talkin' about it."

When they reached the hotel, Pat walked over to where the night clerk was snoring behind the desk, leaned over, and shook him.

"There's a stage goes up every day for the train at Española, isn't there?" he demanded.

"That's right," the clerk mumbled sleepily.

"What time does it leave?"

"Seven in the morning."

"Thanks."

Then he turned back with an afterthought.

"They carry a guard on that stage besides the driver, I reckon?" he asked very casually.

"Sure, they carry a guard."

Upstairs Ezra was sitting on the bed again, looking at the still unconscious Touslin as though he were a tarantula.

"That gag all right?" demanded Pat. "We don't want him disturbin' us by calling for ice water when he wakes up."

"The gag's all right," said Ezra morosely. "I poured some

water through, and tied up the wounds in his arms. Will you tell me what the hell you're goin' to do with him?"

"In the mornin'," Pat said patiently as though he were trying to reason with a child, "we'll all take the stage up to Española and from there the D. & R. G. for Pueblo. From Pueblo we'll take another train for Hopewell Junction, and ride up to Dutch Springs—that is, unless you got an easier and quicker way of gettin' home."

Ezra looked at Darcy hopelessly. "He's gone off his head. He's forgot what's happened."

"I'm goin' to bed," Pat yawned. "It's one o'clock and we got to roll out by six. . . . Ezra, if you thought a little less of what had happened, and a little more of what *might* happen, you'd be a more desirable member of the community."

On the dot of six Pat opened his eyes and was instantly wide awake. He sprang out of bed and crossed to where Pot Shot lay in the corner. The ropes were still tight and the gag solid in his mouth. Pat poured some water through the gag. Pot Shot's venomous black eyes glared up at him with fury and hate.

Then Pat roused his companions.

"Roll out, and get your clothes on," he ordered.

And while they dressed, he talked rapidly. "There's only one chance of making the state line, and we're takin' it," he said crisply. "It's not just as if we had to get away from Santa Fé. It's the hell of a long ways out of New Mexico in any direction. And what with the telegraph, and the troops they got scattered around the territory, and everything else, we'll never make it except by taking the train up from Española. You see, as far as New Mexico goes, we've broken about every law they got, and they'll be out to get us. Without Pot Shot, we might ride for it. But even so, we'd have to get horses and equipment, and when you're not set for it, dodging posses ain't very pleasant."

"And how in hell are you goin' to ride the stage without bein' recognized, and what about Pot Shot?" Ezra demanded scathingly.

"We're goin' to run the stage service today," Pat grinned. "Darcy, here, is an expert with four horses. And I won't be no mean guard. And you, Ezra, can take care of the patient inside if you ain't needed on top. We'll run her right up under the balcony, let Pot Shot down just the way we got him up, and then drive like hell."

Ezra groaned, but Darcy was looking at Pat with admiration.

"It may work!" he cried excitedly.

"Come on then. We got to find the stables. I sort of figured we might take the stage over from there just about the time they're ready to start."

"What about bein' recognized on the way?"

"Have to risk that. You can't expect 'em to bring the stage over to the hotel and hand you the reins. Ezra, you get the corpse all ready to lower when we pull up under the balcony—and gimme your rifle."

Half an hour later Pat and Sandy were lounging across the street from the stage line stables. The coach was in the open corral at the side, and they could see four horses being harnessed up inside the stable.

"If this driver and guard are like any pair I've ever known, they won't turn up until the last minute," Pat said thoughtfully. "If that's right, by cuttin' it fine, we might just have those stable hands to argue with."

The wheel horses were led out and their traces fastened.

Darcy studied them with interest.

"Those are good horses. They'll be able to travel."

"They'll have to," said Pat grimly. "You got to make a record for this run. Touslin wasn't lyin' when he said they had guards out everywhere. I slipped up into the tower at the hotel when you was finishing dressing, and anyone leavin' town is goin' to be looked over."

"How far did you say it was?"

"About twenty-five miles."

"You know the road?"

"Straight up the way we came down until we get opposite to Santa Clara, then straight across the Rio Grande and north again."

"There's nothin' the matter with *them* either," Darcy remarked with satisfaction as the two lighter weight lead horses were swung into place. A Mexican boy stood at their heads to keep them quiet.

"What time is it?" asked Sandy a little nervously.

Pat glanced at his watch.

"Quarter of. They got that outfit all ready to roll?"

Sandy nodded.

"Well, maybe it's time to go. Barrin' accidents, I can take care of those boys over there. You head straight for the box, get set, and tell me when you're ready. I'll swing up. But, damn it, kid, don't go off without me."

The pair sauntered across the street and into the corral. The Mexican stable boys payed no attention to them. Pat took up a position near the boy holding the horses, standing where he could watch both the stable door and the street. Sandy wandered around to the high wooden wheel under the driver's seat. He put his foot on the hub, swung up to the rim, and a second later was picking up the reins.

"Hey, hey," protested the Mexican. "What you doin'?"

"Stand away, boy," Pat snapped, pushing the boy backward and pulling out a gun. The horses began to plunge wildly. Two more stablemen had appeared in the doorway and were watching the scene rooted to the ground in complete amazement.

"All set," called Sandy.

"Let 'er go," Pat yelled, and as the coach hurtled forward made a flying leap for the luggage rack in the rear.

They swung out into the street, the heavy body of the coach rolling way over on its leather strap springs as they

took the corner. Sandy's long whip cracked, and the horses broke into a gallop.

Those narrow, twisting streets were not planned for stage coaches drawn by four horses at any speed, much less at a gallop. Clinging desperately to the guard rail at the top of the coach, his Winchester between his knees, Pat realized that in Sandy he was watching a master at his art; but wondered at the same time whether they would ever reach the Palace Hotel. The few pedestrians on the street at that hour scurried into doorways as the galloping horses and careening stage bore down on them. To them it looked like a runaway, because certainly no sane man would drive so. Sandy wasn't slowing down for anyone. They almost ran down a burro.

They thundered up to the Palace, swept around to the side, and with the brake shoe screeching, pulled up under the balcony by Pat's window.

Ezra's red head shot out from above.

"Hurry up," Pat cried, leaping to the ground. "Let him down. What the hell are you waiting for?"

An oblong body wrapped in a blanket and tied up like a big blanket roll appeared on the balcony railing, dropped with a jerk a few feet to where Ezra had the ropes snubbed, and then descended slowly to the ground. Pat picked it up, pushed it into the interior of the coach and slammed the door.

"May I ask what you are doing?" came a polite question from the porch veranda a few feet away.

Pat looked up quickly. Some guest at the hotel, apparently, up early.

"Smallpox," he whispered. "Don't tell anyone, or they'll quarantine the hotel."

The little man in gray scurried away in terror.

Ezra had jumped down on to the top of the coach.

"Get inside," Pat ordered, "or it will look suspicious."

A few seconds later they were off again, scudded around

on to Capital Avenue, and at a dead run headed for the trail leading north.

At the outskirts of the town, they saw four armed men ahead of them at the side of the road.

"Keep rollin'," yelled Pat.

And they thundered by, while the four Mexicans watched them spellbound. To them, too, this was a runaway. They paid no attention to the driver or guard.

Once clear of the town, Pat crawled gingerly forward over the coach, and dropped down beside Sandy.

"Kid, that's driving," he said admiringly.

Sandy grinned, but did not take his eyes off the road. He had the reins wrapped around his wrists. His feet were braced against the boards.

"How long'll they last at this rate?" asked Pat.

"No twenty-five miles," Sandy grunted.

"Pull 'em in for a while. They've got to last as far as Española. We may be in the clear, but I doubt it. I figure we've got fifteen, maybe twenty minutes head start before they start pourin' out of Santa Fé after us."

He leaned over the edge of the coach.

"Ezra, can you pull your carcass up here while we're rollin'? Chances are, there'll be work for you before long."

Then he made his way back to the rear. In a few moments, and after a good deal of difficulty, Ezra pulled himself up over the side of the coach and joined them.

"Just another one of them things that can't be done, but is, eh, Wall Eye?" Pat jeered at him.

"Gimme back my rifle. If there's any shootin', I'm usin' it. We ain't finished yet."

And they weren't. They had gone perhaps four miles more at a fast trot, when they struck a hill that forced Sandy to let his horses drop back into a walk. Pat, looking backward down the road through the heavy cloud of dust hanging over the trail, heard over the creaking of the coach the sound of horses hooves.

"There they come," he muttered. "How many Ezra? Four?"

"Four or five," Ezra replied after listening a moment. He wiped the dust off the sights of his rifle.

"That's easy," said Pat. "It's a lot better shootin' from a coach than a horse."

"Are we waitin' for them to open up?" drawled Ezra.

"We're takin' no chances on who they are. Soon as you see anything, cut down on the horses. That way we'll be sure, and won't be hurting no innocent bystanders."

"I'd about as leave shoot a man as a horse."

"Yeah, I know, but get their horses just the same—there they come!"

Ezra raised his rifle slowly and pulled the trigger. A horse stumbled and crashed down, throwing his rider. Then the rifle swung an inch to the left and spoke again.

The dust blotted out their pursuers for the moment, and there was complete silence from behind. The other horsemen had apparently pulled up. Then a gust of wind swept the dust away from the road, and Pat made out two figures on horseback and one man on foot huddled together. A fourth man lay motionless on the ground near-by.

"Looks as if they'd had enough," Pat decided. "Must be those guards we passed outside Santa Fé, deciding something might be wrong. Ezra, just do a little shootin' toward 'em as discouragement. No point in hittin' anything, though."

Deliberately Ezra emptied his rifle around the group. It was all that was needed. Hurriedly the two mounted men helped their injured companions up onto the horses in back of them, and riding double, the defeated army started back toward Santa Fé.

As the coach breasted the crest of the hill, Sandy's whip cracked like a pistol shot, and the stage started rocking again.

"Pat, if they send the cavalry after us, and they catch

up with us, are you goin' to tangle horns with *them?*" Ezra asked slowly.

"Why not?"

"I reckon you know what happens if you start fightin' Uncle Sam. These little local tin horns is one thing. But the federals——"

"If I'm goin' to be strung up," Pat retorted cheerfully, "I'd rather it was with a nice new government hemp than some greasy old piece o' rawhide these greasers would use. Of course, Ezra, it's a mite hard on *you,* 'cause so far you ain't really done nothin' down here to be hanged *for,* but you will before we're through."

Ezra shook his head sadly.

"I don't like it," he muttered.

"You never do," grinned Pat.

Mile after mile Sandy kept them rolling, watching the condition of his horses with a keen, appraising eye, getting everything out of them that they had. Given any slight down grade, and he'd whip them into a hard gallop, knowing that the heavy coach behind them was almost carrying itself. On the level he kept them trotting. It was only when they struck a hill that he let them settle into a walk for a short breathing space. They were standing the strain well, so far. The gelding by the off wheel was breathing too hard, but it looked as though he'd last. Sandy hated to ruin horses that way, but they were playing a game where horses were only white chips.

They thundered through the little village of Tesuque, pigs and sheep scattering before them, and then, at a dead run, Sandy shot through the shallow ford at the Tesuque River, which they'd been following most of the way up from Santa Fé.

"Cripes," moaned Ezra, "that Irishman's crazy. If there'd been a rock in that ford——"

"He'd have missed it! Sandy's the best hand with four broncs I've ever seen—and he's lucky."

"I'm prayin' you're right," the big man muttered devoutly.

Up the valley at Pojoaque, they swung west, and took the right fork beyond for Santa Clara.

"It's not far now," Pat declared.

He crawled forward to Sandy again.

"How are your horses?"

Darcy shook his head dubiously.

"I'll have to be easing them some if it's much further," he said.

"Not more than ten miles, maybe only eight. We've been makin' almost as good time as a rider could. If you *could* keep 'em going——" Pat urged persuasively.

But just about then they started to climb, the trail leaving the river, and winding up between the foothills.

Sandy let his horses drop into a walk.

"Got to, or they'll be breaking their hearts open," he apologized.

"God, Irish, what's happened to your hands?" Pat demanded.

The palms and fingers of Sandy's hands were raw, and the reins were clotted with blood.

"I've got no gloves, and you can't drive four horses like this without gloves. But don't be worrying about those hands. There's lots left of them still."

It wasn't until they saw the Rio Grande below them, that Sandy got his horses into a gallop again.

"Santa Clara's just north of here," Pat announced. "We're damn near there. Cross the bridge over the Rio Grande, and swing north in the town beyond. I'm going back to Ezra, he's lookin' nervous again."

"What good will it be if we get to the station an hour before the train is starting?" demanded Sandy.

"Leave that to me," Pat grinned over his shoulder, and clambered back to the boot.

"Looks as though you'd make it," admitted Ezra grudg-

ingly. "Can't be much further."

They rumbled over the loose plank bridge and into the haphazard village of Santa Clara. Sandy careened by the plaza and skidded the stage around the corner north. As he began whipping the horses into a gallop again, he began to curse.

"What's wrong?" Pat yelled.

"One trace is gone!"

In an instant Pat was beside him, peering down. The inside trace from the off horse was dragging in the dirt. The trace chain had snapped where it had been attached to the whiffletree.

"Will she hold with three?" Pat asked.

"I doubt it. We better stop and see if we can fix it. There's rope inside."

"Keep 'em running," ordered Pat grimly.

He unbuckled his guns, took off his hat, and began to let himself down over the front of the coach between the wildly galloping horses and the driver's box.

"For God's sake, don't do that," yelled Sandy. "You'll kill yourself."

Pat did not reply. His feet were on the draw bar. His hands on the iron braces of the box over his head, he crouched down gingerly. He straddled the draw bar, steadying himself with the breeching on the off horse.

"Pat, don't! Get back up here! He'll kick you into hell!"

"Keep rollin'!"

He leaned way forward between the two wheel horses and grasped the broken trace. He put the trace chain between his teeth, and then with his free hand tried to straighten out the whiffletree. But with the weight of the coach dragging on the outside trace, it was hopeless.

"Jerk 'em up for a second," he called up. "So she'll be runnin' free."

As the drag of the coach lightened, he worked the inside end of the tree way forward. He got the chain snubbed

around the wooden shaft and then clamped down on it with a grip of steel.

"Give it to them!" he shouted up to Sandy.

"All right, but the Virgin help you," Sandy muttered as he laid on his whip again.

Pat wondered how long he could hold it. The moment he relaxed the slightest, he could feel the trace chain slip a little. His fingers began to ache. Then his arm. They were tearing across the river flats now, and Sandy had forgotten any idea of sparing his horses.

Suddenly Pat heard Ezra yell excitedly from behind. At the same moment Sandy leaned over the footboards.

"They're comin'," he cried. "Must be twenty-five of 'em."

"How far back?" Pat gasped from between clenched teeth. His face was red, and the veins were standing out in his forehead from the strain.

"Two miles. Just comin' up to the bridge."

"Faster! Faster!" Pat implored. "It's not far now. Tell me before they get within range."

Sandy's head disappeared, and he began lashing his horses mercilessly, savagely, for by now they were so far gone that when he let his whip rest, they slowed down.

Pat closed his eyes and hung on, his aching hand still like a vise on the metal links that were gnawing into his flesh. He began to count one to fifty. Then he'd start over again.

All at once, he heard the grinding of brakes, and the rigid trace grew slack in his hand.

He opened his eyes. They were at the station. The train stood there, ten yards away. An engine, a tender, two box cars, one passenger coach, and a caboose.

And then the off wheel horse collapsed. The other horses stood there uncertainly, too fatigued to move.

In a flash Pat was on his feet beside the coach, peering back toward Santa Clara. He could see their pursuers coming across the flats—fast.

Sandy dropped down beside him. His hands and arms were shaking. He could hardly stand for sheer exhaustion. He dropped Pat's guns on the ground. Ezra still sat up over the boot, waiting for instructions.

"We got four minutes, maybe," Pat snapped. "Ezra, get Pot Shot onto that train—in the caboose. To hell with the passenger coach."

"Here, what's all this?" a loud, threatening voice demanded from behind them.

Pat wheeled, reaching for his guns, but they were still on the ground.

It was the train conductor.

"Mister, how soon do you pull out?"

"Not for an hour."

Pat threw a quick glance toward the engine. He could see that steam was up. The safety valve was hissing.

"You're pullin' out right now," he announced. "Get Touslin aboard, Ezra."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"All aboard," said Pat grimly, picking up his guns. "There's about twenty-five friends arrivin' here pronto to see us off, and we just don't feel like waiting to say 'goodbye,' see?"

"Here you, what are you doin' in that caboose?" the conductor yelled as Ezra pushed his bundle up on the rear platform.

Pat grabbed the conductor by the shoulder, swung him around, and pushed the barrel of his Colt into his stomach.

"This isn't play," he said quietly. "Get this train movin' within sixty seconds, or you'll never punch another ticket."

The conductor's face went white. For the first time he realized that something really serious was happening.

"I—c-c-can't! The eng-g-gineer ain't even on b-b-board," he stammered. "Just the f-f-fireman."

"To hell with the engineer. The fireman'll do. One of us'll fire."

"It's ag-g-gainst the rules."

"Rules be damned. This is life or death. Sandy, take him up to the engine, and get this damn train *movin'*."

At that moment the door of the station was flung open and the wild-eyed station agent burst out onto the platform.

"Get back in there!" Pat yelled, and buried three shots in the wooden platform under his feet.

The man dove back into the station.

Sandy started the conductor up the track at a dog trot, his gun pressing into the small of his back.

Pat jumped for the platform of the caboose, and looked back toward Santa Clara.

The posse was less than half a mile away now. It was straggling, in this last wild dash, the strongest horses leading. But in the first group were at least ten riders. They were low in their saddles, burning leather. Pat could see their arms rising and falling as they quirted their horses.

On each side of the rear caboose door was a small window. Pat entered. Ezra was already at one of the windows, his rifle ready. Touslin lay on the plank floor of the car.

"What are we waitin' for?" Ezra growled. "You ought to have gone forward with Darcy. He may need help."

"Two of us back here'll hold 'em off a bit and give him more time. Start shootin' as soon as they're within range."

"Wish to God you had a rifle—not that you can hit anything," Ezra added sourly.

Silent, tense they waited. Seconds dragged like minutes. Closer and closer came the posse.

"Say, Pat, that ain't no Mexican posse! Them's soldiers!"

"Yeah, I know it," Pat replied. " 'Bout time now, Ezra. Shoot at their horses, but don't hit the federals unless you want to be the first guest in that penitentiary they're goin' to build down at Santa Fé."

Just as Ezra raised his rifle, lead began to splatter into the wood caboose. He fired, and one of the horses went down.

"Good shot," muttered Pat.

Ezra fired again and missed.

In a moment now they'd be within range of a forty-four. Pat pulled both guns out of their holsters and looked at them carefully. This might be the last time he would use them.

Then he started firing. It was still too far for any accurate shooting, but the noise was good.

A second horse went down under Ezra's rifle.

Three hundred yards away and they kept on coming. Pat could make out the officer who was leading them. And beside him rode a man who looked as though he might be Sheriff Touslin.

He took a careful bead on Touslin, and pulled the trigger. Touslin tumbled out of his saddle, and his riderless horse galloped wildly off to the left.

"This is a right nice fort," Pat said with satisfaction as he reloaded his Colts. "And it looks as though we're goin' to need it."

Just then the train gave a jerk, a second jerk, and started slowly forward.

"Thank God," muttered Ezra, sitting down on the wooden bench by his window and wiping the sweat off his forehead.

"Thank Darcy," grinned Pat. "But they're still gainin' on us. Better get up to your window again."

A few seconds later, the train began to gather speed and pull away into safety.

Pat sighed with satisfaction, and dropped down beside Ezra on the bench.

"Well, you old coyote," he said affectionately. "That's over."

Ezra nodded glumly. "This is the last time, Pat. I ain't never——"

"Let's unroll Pot Shot and tell him all his worries are over," Pat grinned.

He crossed to the bundle, and untied the ropes holding the blanket. Then he grabbed the edge of the blanket, and rolled Pot Shot out on the wooden floor.

"We'll take his gag out, too. I'd sort of like to hear what he's got to say."

For a few moments Touslin could not speak. His tongue was parched, and he moved his lips with difficulty.

"You're on the train goin' north, Pot Shot," Pat purred in a friendly voice. "Goin' right back up into Colorado."

"It—is—like hell," Touslin croaked thickly. "Yuh damn fool. Don't yuh know this train stops a dozen times before we hit the state line, and——"

"*This* train's an express train, Pot Shot, it don't stop at Mexico stations. They ain't none of 'em important enough to us. . . . Just the same, Ezra, I reckon you'd better mosey up to the engine and talk to the fireman about that. He might not realize just how things stand. Tell Sandy I'll be up pretty soon to spell him with his firing."

Ezra disappeared.

"Well, Touslin?" Pat demanded grimly.

But Pot Shot was through. He closed his eyes and his lips shut defiantly.

It wasn't long before Ezra returned, covered with coal dirt from climbing over the coal car.

"All right ahead?" Pat demanded.

Ezra smiled for the first time in days.

"That damn Irishman's just sittin' there takin' it easy. He's got the *conductor* firin' the engine."

"Where's the brakeman?"

"I reckon he missed the train."

"You know, Ezra, even if Dutch Springs is willing to pay for this special train, there's some people going to be sort of upset about our ordering it up on such short notice. Railroads are mighty unreasonable about such things."

"I'm mighty glad *my* name ain't Stevens," Ezra said seriously. "Between the New Mexico folks, Uncle Sam, and

the D. & R. G., it looks as though you was goin' to have to keep movin' around mighty brisk for the rest of your natural life, Pat."

Pat thought for a few minutes.

"Ezra, maybe this here is all a dream—a bad dream."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, I sort of figure it that we caught up with Pot Shot before he even hit the New Mexico line. And we brought him back from there—ridin', Ezra, ridin' all the way." Pat paused for a moment. Then he grinned. "We'll just slip off this train *before* it hits Pueblo, find us some horses, and—— Well, so far as I know, no one around these parts knows exactly who we are or where we're from. They don't even know what state we're from."

"Except Pot Shot," objected Ezra.

"Yes, except Pot Shot," Pat nodded. "But, somehow, I figure folks in Dutch Springs aren't goin' to take much stock in any lies Pot Shot tells 'em—for a number of reasons."

Ezra's big red eye looked almost merry. "You may be right, Pat. These here special trains are likely to run into money."

"Speakin' of money," Pat said. "With his share of that reward, I reckon Sandy'll be gettin' married——"

"Yeah," Ezra broke in, "I was just tryin' to decide whether it'd be better for Sam and me to stock up the Bar ES with heifers or cows."

"Gimme some tobacco. I'm all out," said Pat. He thought for a minute as he rolled his cigarette. "For that range of yours, Ezra," he said at last, "seems to me I'd buy cows."

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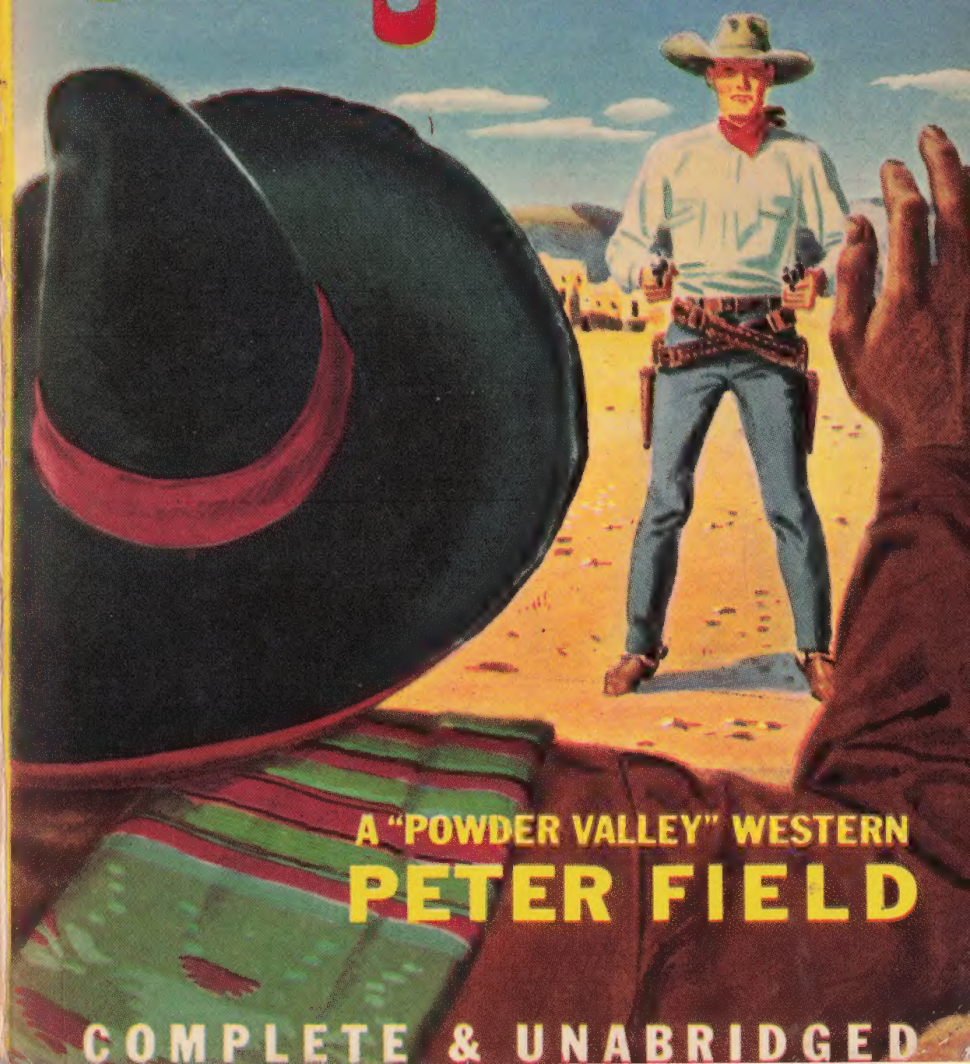

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